Sree Narayana Guru was a great saint of India whose teachings have a universal appeal and a perennial value. The Guru's most famous saying, 'One caste, one religion, one God for man,' is a call to all mankind to transcend the limits of formal religion and to work on the spiritual level towards evolving a close-knit world community. Written lucidly, this book shows how the life of the Guru could well serve as a model for the uplift of suffering humanity anywhere, any time.

Murkot Kunhappa, the author of this book, has had a grand-stand view of the activities of the Guru since his childhood. He supplemented them by a close study of the works of the saint. He has written both in English and in Malayalam as a freelance journalist and author.

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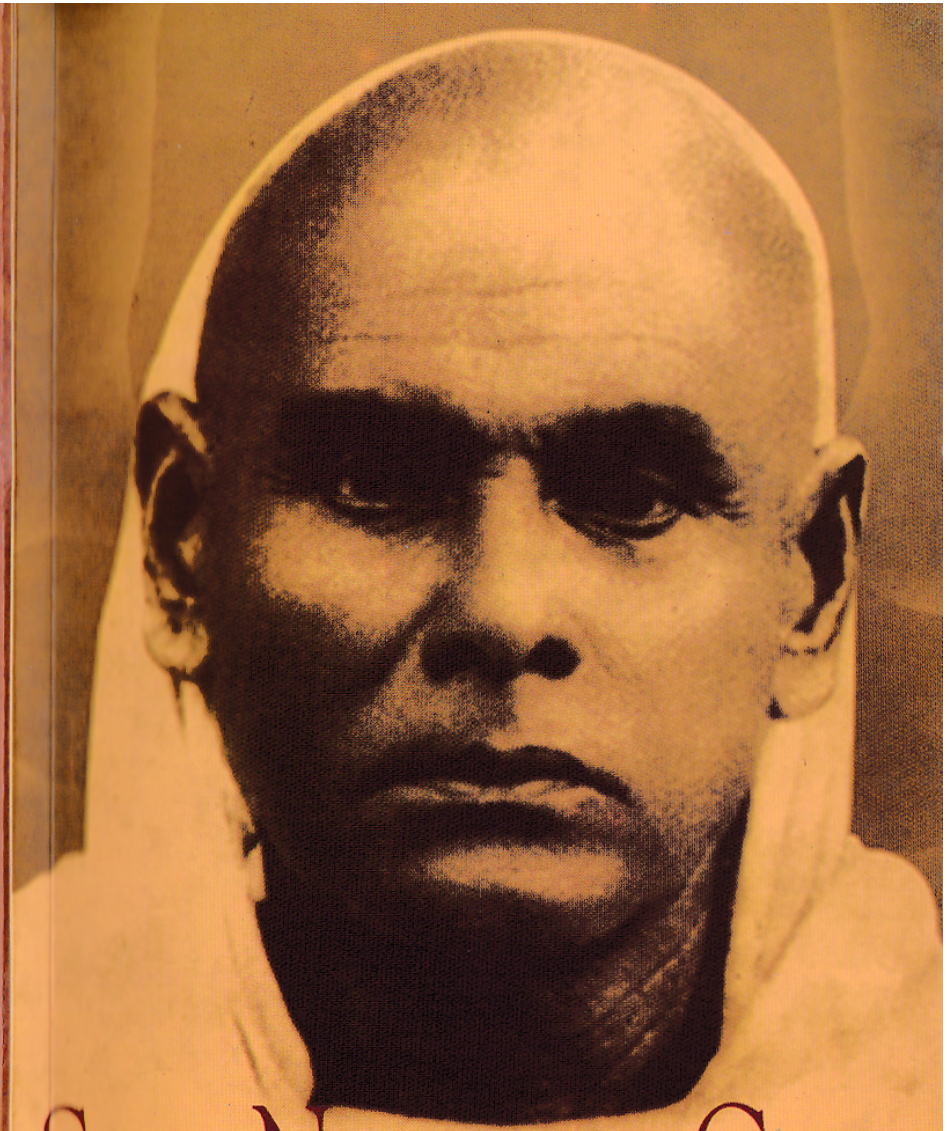

Sree Narayana Guru

MURKOT KUNHAPPA

National Biography

SREE NARAYANA GURU

MURKOT KUNHAPPA

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

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PREFACE

"I have been touring different parts of the world. During these travels I have had the good fortune to come into contact with several saints and *Maharishis* (great saints). But I have frankly to admit that I have never come across one who is spiritually greater than Swami Sree Narayana Guru of Kerala - nay, a person who is on par with him in spiritual attainments.

I am sure I shall never forget that radiant face, illuminated by self-effulgent light of divine glory and those yogic eyes fixing their gaze on a remote point on the distant horizon."

- Rabindranath Tagore

That was the impression which Tagore gathered when he met the Guru in 1922.

Romain Rolland sums up his observations by recording:

The great Guru Sree Narayana's teaching was permeated with the philosophy of Sankara... He was, one might say, *Jnanin* (one who has knowledge of Self) in action, a grand religious intellectual, who had a living sense of the people and of social necessities. He has contributed greatly to the elevation of the oppressed classes (there were two million of them) in South India and his work had been associated at certain times with that of Gandhi.

Gandhiji always referred to the Guru as his Holiness Sree Narayana Guru and accepted the Guru's points of view in intensifying Harijan uplift activities.

Today, Sree Narayana Guru's life, his message and his activities have urgent and specific relevance to India in particular and the world at large in general.

The Guru was an *Advaitin* (believer in non-dualism) in the sense in which Sankaracharya was, but with a difference. In his sixteen years of preaching *Advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy and establishing it as the sublime contribution of India to the world of metaphysical thought, the Acharya had created an elite who were to carry on his tradition. The Guru carries on the tradition, but in doing so extends it so as to become a *Jnanin* (follower of the path of knowledge of self) in action incarnated for the benefit of the suffering multitudes.

Within a period of less than half a century, he had metamorphosed the depressed castes of Kerala from dust into men who could stand on their own legs as self-respecting human beings. Thanks to his activities, they could walk on the public roads with complete freedom. The roads around temples were thrown open to them in 1925 and the temple authorities were forbidden by law in 1936 to refuse entry to the untouchables into the temples, years before anything like it happened in other parts of India.

Where once they were not admitted into schools, they were freely granted admission within two or three decades and before 1947, the untouchables had established on their own, a dozen colleges along with high schools and other educational institutions. When the Swamiji started his mission in 1895, there was not a single employee among the lower castes in government service, not even an employee drawing a salary of rupees five. By 1947, there was a significant number of them working as government servants, some of them holding the highest posts.

This impetus, combined with the other factors too no doubt, brought out the literary, artistic and academic talents latent in the lower castes. Poets, editors, essayists, novelists, short-story writers, professors, and principals arose and provided them with a respectable status in the land as a whole.

The Guru based the foundation of all progress in the reformation of religious practices, social customs, and the daily habits of the people. All roads lead to the same summit, so say the *Advaitins*. The Guru added a practical rider to it, saying that each man has to start the journey from the point at which he finds himself. The longest journey, says a Chinese proverb, starts with the first step. He began with that first step and lighted the way for his followers along the entire journey, by messages, by reform of social customs, by provision of different types of houses of worship and, above all, by metaphysical writings shorn of all irrelevant embellishments.

In wresting the rights from people with age-old vested interests, he never uttered a single word against them. He advised his followers not to say anything that would hurt the feelings of other religionists or condemn anybody. The result was that the broad-minded leaders of the higher castes respected him and cooperated in the movements for the uplift of the depressed classes. Some of them even went to jail for that cause and once, thousands went in procession on foot, walking over a hundred kilometers to plead with the Maharajah of Travancore to grant them freedom of the roads around the temples to all castes. Several of his most important *sanyasi* (ascetic) disciples belonged to higher castes including Brahmins.

It was a bloodless revolution which he achieved.

Wherever there are down-trodden, underprivileged groups in the world, message of Sree Narayana Guru, "Educate that you may be free; organise that you may be strong; industrialise that your financial status may improve" - has relevance at all times and in all climes.

All these programmes have, however, to be based on deep religious faith that the supreme ONE alone exists and all that we see, are only its variegated manifestations. Every man's face is different bfrom that of every other man and yet no one ever doubts that we are all human beings and therefore sons of the same Father in heaven.

The *Advaita* philosophy of the Guru will prevent mutual cooperation and professions of oneness from deteriorating into a carnal philosophy of human pragmatism.

The message of 'One caste, One religion, One God for man" should not have a commercial mentality behind it, if the United Nations Organisation and other world bodies are to succeed in their mission. Sree Narayana Guru's message has a universal significance and relevance for all times.

The entire narrative portion of the life and works of the Guru is a summary of the definitive biography of Sree Narayana Guru, (in two volumes) written by Murkot Kumaran, the father of the present author. The book has served as source material for many a salient point in the 40-odd biographies of the Guru.

Murkot Kumaran was a teacher and a writer who gave shape to modern Malayalam prose, having written innumerable articles and over twenty-five books that helped in modernising the thoughts of readers from drawing-rooms to the kitchens of Kerala- a land where even domestic servants are avid readers of papers and magazines.

He was the most devout follower of the Guru, having known him personally and intimately for years on end. As a leader who propagated the teachings of the Guru, his thoughts and ideas on the Guru's way of revolutionising society has had such a tremendous impact on the present writer's mind that it is very difficult, even for me, to sort out his thoughts from my own ideas.

This book is dedicated to his revered memory.

MURKOT KUNHAPPA

1

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Sree Narayana Guru was born in A.D.1856 in Chembazanthi, a quiet little town, about 12 kilometers north of Trivandrum, the capital of the then Indian native State of Travancore. Trivandrum is today the capital of Kerala, one of the most fascinating States of India, nestling in the south-west corner, with the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea on the west forming its main borders.

There are two communities in Kerala known generally as Nairs and Ezhavas, who form the largest castes in that State. Nairs were Sudras belonging to the hierarchy of the *Varna* (caste) system and so were counted among the cluster of the higher castes known as *Savarnas* (those having caste). The Ezhavas were an unapproachable caste belonging to the group of castes outside the *Varna* system and were, therefore, *Avarnas* (outcastes, those not in the caste purview). Sree Narayana Guru was born an Ezhava.

Contact with Ezhavas at a distance of 12 feet was supposed to pollute the *Savarnas*, this distance increasing as one went up the scale of castes until at last the Ezhava polluted the Brahmin at a distance of 32 feet. At the same time, there used to be a number of castes below the Ezhava, one below the other, who polluted each other in various ways at varying distances. The maltreatment which these *Avarnas* had to suffer was so horrible and meaningless that Swami Vivekanada characterised Kerala as the 'lunatic asylum of India'.

Even so, they seemed to have had a method in their madness and some of the exceptions to these caste restrictions make Kerala an intriguing part of India. There is evidence in the birth-place of

Sree Narayana Guru that in the past, Nairs and Ezhavas did co-operate closely with each other without, be it noted, violating the polluting distance between them. The highly numerous, sturdy agriculturist Ezhava, who was the traditional toddy-tapper too, proved to be a strong arm for the chieftains in their frays. There is, for instance, a temple of Goddess Bhagavathy which belongs to the Ezhavas near the birth-place of the Guru where the festivals were conducted jointly by Nairs and Ezhavas. Two platforms on two sides of the temple still bear witness to the custom, whereby the Ezhavas and the Nairs cooperated in conducting the ceremonies at shrines, even though they took care to sit apart while doing so.

A Cowshed

In that place stands a hut that could rightly be mistaken for a cowshed. This hut which appeared to be too old to stand erect, with no windows except for three iron bars in a yawn in the front for letting in air and light into three small rooms was the house where Sree Narayana Guru was born. His father was Madan ashan, a teacher and a physician, and his mother's name was Kutty.

Untouchable, nay even unapproachable and down-trodden, as the Ezhavas happened to be, there were even in those dark days a fair sprinkling of *Vaidyas* or physicians among them practising the Ayurvedic system, whose texts were in classical Sanskrit. Naturally, therefore, there were Sanskrit scholars of high calibre among them. In fact, the entire landscape of Kerala is peppered with Ezhava *Vaidyas* (physicians) and Sanskrit scholars, so much so that one could state that Ayurveda and, for that matter, Sanskrit, too, survived among the masses in Kerala due to the Ezhava *Vaidyas*. Of course, the Namboodiri Brahmins were the repositories of Sanskrit and sastras like *Ayurveda*. But they were inaccessible to the ordinary run of men and their number was small.

Sree Narayana Guru's maternal uncles were *Vaidyas* and Sanskrit scholars, Krishnan Vaidiar being an Ashan, or teacher, also. As a social reformer who strove hard to uplift his own caste, he nevertheless tried understandably, to keep the castes below the

Ezhavas in their place. Untouchability and unapproachability were not anathema to any caste, so long as the customs applied to people below them.

Boyish Pranks

The great poet Kumaran Asan, who was to the Guru what Swami Vivekananda was to Sree Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, records that Sree Narayana Guru or rather Nanu as he was affectionately called, was a mischievous boy. The instances of mischief given by Ashan are, however, significant and revealing. The little boy would take special delight in running out to touch the lower caste people and then return straight to the orthodox members of the family to touch and pollute them. Fruits and sweets specially reserved for the gods were the main targets of his foraging raids. He would eat them with gusto, saying, "If I (the child) am pleased, the gods would be happy."

Those were the childish pranks of this boy who later became an *Advaitin* i.e. a person who saw everything in the universe as the manifestation of the ONE.

Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, another contemporary, who knew Nanu intimately, says that the boy had an inborn sympathy for the poor and the down-trodden, a sort of aversion towards worldliness, and had from a very tender age a religious turn of mind.

One evening, while he was returning from school along with other boys, he saw a *Sanyasi* (recluse) passing that way. The ochre-coloured dress, the flowing beard and the unkempt coiffure of this stranger amused the children. They jeered at him, laughed at him, and even threw stones at him. Little Nanu could not stand this. Unfortunately he was not big enough to prevent them from hurting the *Sanyasi* or old enough to advise them of the wrong they were doing. He did what he could: he cried. The children were stunned. The *Sanyasi* saw this, went up to the boy and consoling him, carried him on his shoulders to his house, the other boys trailing behind, feeling guilty, puzzled and foolish!

With a philosophical temperament far above his age, he

would join issue with elders on philosophical points, holding his own with a sureness that astonished everyone. They saw him very often lost in deep thought, most probably trying to solve on his own, problems to which elders around him had no answer. The puzzles disturbed him immensely.

When he was six years of age, a close relative living in his family house passed away. The day after the cremation ceremonies were over, the family was worried to find that Nanu was missing. Everyone searched for him here, there, and everywhere, but nowhere could he be found. The sun had set and still Nanu had not turned up. Tired, sad, disappointed and wondering what to do, they sat silent in the house, when all of a sudden they got the news. A Pulaya (Harijan) working in the fields came running and panted out that Nanu was seen hiding in a thicket.

Nanu's uncles and cousins and aunts and others, too, hurried to the place, gathered him in their arms and brought him home, he riding on his uncle's shoulders. When they anxiously enquired why he had gone away to the jungle and had sat there alone so long, Nanu replied:

"Two days ago when uncle died, there was moaning and wailing among everyone here. In a short while all that sorrow seems to have vanished. There were pleasant faces, smiles and laughter all around. That made me go away and sit hiding, all by myself, in the jungle."

The elders were at a loss for an answer. They could not explain to him the meaning of death and sorrow. Nor could they clarify how time cures the pangs of grief. But that was exactly what the child was struggling to grasp in solitude, all by himself, at the tender age of six.

2

EDUCATION

Nanu was initiated into reading, writing and arithmetic at the customary age of five. The Guru chosen for him was a personage of high traditions and great learning, an astrologer and a very well-known man of the place, Chembazanthi Mootha Pillai, a *Savarna*.

Education in those days consisted mainly in learning the simpler works in Sanskrit, sometimes in Bramhi characters. The student Narayanan was quick to learn, never forgetting what he had learnt. Once the early lessons consisting of Sanskrit *Kavyas* (poetical works) were over, there were no facilities for further study in that elementary school. Narayanan's uncles, therefore, continued to teach the nephew at home in their spare time. It was immensely pleasant to teach this highly intelligent child and Krishnan Vaidiar was often amazed at the precocity of the boy.

There were no schools nearby where the child could continue his studies, while at the same time he was too young to be sent as a boarder to a school several miles away.

Cowherd

And so Narayanan became a cowherd. He enjoyed lonely sojourns in the nearby hills and jungles, while his charges, the cows, calmly grazed and dozed as they chewed their cud. The thoughtful cowherd would be seen perched on cashew trees chanting to himself the *slokas* (verses) he had learnt, lost in reflection on their relevance to life.

Back at home, the studies under uncle Krishna Vaidiar continued, Narayanan bewildering the uncle more and more every day by the quickness of grasp he displayed at every turn.

After some time, the boy was entrusted with the task of ploughing the fields. Absorbed as he was in lofty thoughts and in solving the stubborn riddles of life and sorrow and death, the budding metaphysicist would let the bullocks go where they liked. He could not bother to guide them and could certainly not bring himself to beat them to take a particular path.

Nanu The 'Bhakta'

The indifference he displayed in training himself to become a householder was further manifested in his desire for wandering from place to place. Often would he go away, stay among friends and relatives at different places like Kayikkara, Trivandrum, Anchuthengu, Venniyode, Nedunganda and other places. Living only a few days at a time in each place, he would move on from one place to another, ever restive, never resting.

Regular in his baths and prayers, and often in a thoughtful mood, with marks of ashes as emblems of prayers on his brow, his outward appearance highly amused the people. They called him a *Bhakta*, a devotee of God, in a derogatory tone, suggesting, as is often done about such singular personalities, that here was a crank if ever there was one. The relatives took this to be mere religosity which would disappear once they could get this Bhakta tied up in wedlock. The barber of the place, who in those days performed the task of marriage-broker, tried his best to 'hook' the youth, only to go away defeated before the rocklike determination of this young man whose *bhakti* (devotion) was made of sterner stuff than people had bargained for.

Small-pox

As the uncles were still wondering what to make of this queer nephew of theirs who seemed to be living in a spiritual cloud devoid of all desire for worldly pleasures, Nanu disappeared. This time, however, they did not worry over him, assuming quite naturally that he was off again on one of his usual mysterious wanderings.

Actually, he was suffering from small-pox. Informing not a soul, Nanu retreated into the temple of goddess situated in the midst of a jungle. No regular *poojas* (worship) were performed there except on specific festival days and so, no one noticed the presence of this patient living all alone in a temple where people never dared to venture after the annual festivals.

His temperature rose. The headache was insufferable. The pox appeared in its full intensity. Weakness, thirst, pain and restlessness tortured him. But still he continued to stay in this frightful, lonely place, alone. He somehow managed to take his ritual bath and passed the time in prayer and meditation. At night when darkness hid the marks of small-pox, he would throw a cloth over his head, go to houses where he was not known, get alms and return to the temple. In the midst of all this, he managed to memorise a work about spiritual detachment written by Melputtur Narayana Bhattathiri, one of the greatest savants of sixteenth-century Kerala.

After 18 days spent in this *tapasya*, (penance) as it were, he was cured. He took his bath and returned home. His uncle gladly welcomed the nephew. But when he saw small-pox marks on the boy's face, he was alarmed. Nanu's explanation that he had been suffering from small-pox, and that he had spent the entire period in the precints of the temple to avoid contagion and being a botheration to others, struck the uncle completely dumb. What a perplexing personality has this lad already become at this young age, mused the uncle! "This youngster who had tremendous strength of will and great mental powers should not waste his life as a cowherd and a ploughman. He should be sent for higher studies," were the thoughts that passed through his mind at that time. As happens very often in life, an incident occurred in a few days to strengthen this resolve.

Higher Studies

A great scholar as he was, Krishnan Vaidiar was still at a loss to understand a Sanskrit verse he had come across for the first time. Consulting his nephew on the odd chance that the youngster might perhaps be able to catch the meaning, he was highly pleased when

Nanu explained the import of the verse with great ease. Then and there, the Vaidiar decided that the boy must be sent for higher studies at any cost, and lost no time in making arrangements accordingly.

That was how Narayana was sent in 1876 to study under Kummanpally Asan, a great scholar, a *savarna* again! At the time of his departure, the uncles offered him some money. The boy refused to take it, saying that he had no need for money. Moreover, said he, it was not proper that the uncles should part with him and this money at one and the same time. In the institution at Kayamkulam there were other Ezhava youths studying under the same high-caste teacher.

But while the Nair boys stayed in the house of the Asan, the Ezhava disciples had to stay elsewhere. The caste system would not be denied its pound of flesh! There was at that time in Kayamkulam an Ezhava family who was rich and generous and greatly concerned in the educational uplift of their community: the famous house of Varanappalli. It was the custom among rich Ezhava families to host studious lads, thus enabling them to study under the *Savarnas* where they were forbidden to stay. Varanappalli was one such famous house-cum-hostel, where a number of Ezhava boys had stayed to study under the Kummanpally Asan. Narayanan found among his hostel mates also some Ezhava youths who became famous later years - an inspiring environment for a studious boy.

Nanu Becomes a Chattambi (Monitor)

Two *slokas* (verses) a day from Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa Mahakavya* were the daily quota of learning in Kummanpally Asan's *Gurukula* (teacher's residence.) A quick grasp of meaning, extreme ease in memorising, and a tenacious memory induced Nanu to beg his teacher to accelerate the pace of teaching. "At this rate," said the boy, "I won't be able to finish my course before I return home and start my routine work." "All right then," replied the Guru "you may learn the *slokas* I teach your seniors also." The student

started learning what the older students were being taught. The progress he made was so remarkable that the Guru was greatly pleased. When he perceived that this extraordinary boy could explain the meaning of even those verses which were not taught to him, the Asan said, "Well then, you might as well be the monitor (*chattambi*) and assist me in my task." Nanu thus rose in status to become "Nanu Chattambi", a name which stuck to him for some time.

Nanu Chattambi, who found himself to be a respected student in the school, the pet of his guru, naturally, became the butt of many practical jokes perpetrated by his less studious companions.

Studies, Prayers and Meditation

In a house or hostel where a number of students live together, a boy who was fond of solitude and preferred prayers, studies and meditation, to being playful, noisy and mischievous would be singled out as the main target of boyish pranks. Nanu suffered all that in silence.

Fortunately, he had a constant companion in Kunhukunhu Panikkar, a person who could understand, appreciate and admire Nanu's way of life. They used to read together, recite together, and study together, poetry, philosophy and religious works. Panikkar, who was also the *bhakta's* (devotee's) room-mate, states that very often when he woke up at night, he used to see Nanu saying his prayers or sitting cross-legged, in meditation.

Meandering among verdurous fields and sylvan landscapes, Nanu used to pluck the leaves of trees and plants, taste them, chew them and even swallow the juice. These experiments in diet provided him with expert knowledge about the edibility or otherwise of forest plants. Later on, this knowledge stood him in good stead when he chose to live as a mendicant in jungles

1879 he had a severe attack of dysentery. His uncle took him home. Thus the second and last course of regular study under a Guru ended all too abruptly.

3

NANU THE 'ASHAN'

After his return from Varanappalli, Nanu Chattambi recovered from his illness. He then started a school at Kadakkavur and later at Anchuthengu, teaching young boys to read, write and study. It was then that Nanu Chattambi became *Nanu Ashan* (teacher).

While he was a teacher at Anchuthengu he used to live in the precincts of the Jnaneswaram temple close by. Spending his leisure hours in prayer and meditation, people saw him then as a strictly celibate and religious-minded youth. He conducted Gita classes in the temple for the benefit of those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness.

The verses he composed at that time show him as searching for the true meaning of life, accepting some ideas and rejecting others, as if saying in his own youthful way, 'Not this, not this' and then coming to new concepts only to cast them too aside again.

His continual aspirations took the form of prayers to *Ishta-Devata* (tutelary deity) where he adorned the deity with abstract attributes which carried metaphysical undertones, changing the terms from verse to verse as his spirit rose upwards.

Siva was his *Ishta-Devata*, whom he worshipped:
Oh! God I am not eager to attain that beatitude
Where Thou and I merge into one.
All paths, even those other than that of Siva
Are all in the ultimate sense paths of Siva.

He had left worldly yearnings behind. And yet worldly bonds of flesh continued to vex him. Pulled as he was between this world and the other, we see him taking refuge in Siva as the saviour from

the trammels of the flesh :

Siva, Siva, there is none equal to thee.
Knowing all this,
Still am I straying
Among puzzling thoughts that
Lead me, to what?

Siva is the refuge to protect us from yearnings that lead us astray. Our favourite god, *Ishta-Devata*, (tutelar deity) guides us thus along the spiritual path which leads us on and on, up and up.

Indian mythology has always been part of a living culture, even for the greatest Advaitic sages, like Sankara, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Ramana Maharshi and Sree Narayana Guru. They used ancient beliefs as a chemist uses raw materials, moulding them in the white-hot crucible of their *tapas* (penance) to fit them into the metaphysical concept of God, one God and the only God. True, these implications were understood only by the chosen few but they affected all. These *tapaswins* (those who undertake penance) treated the great body of accumulated myths as a source of symbols also with which to express philosophical ideas in their hymns. Inevitably, the myths around those symbols themselves were metamorphised poetically to conform to the ideas that they were now made to symbolise.

Marriage

The ecstasies into which *bhakti* led him were once again conceived by people at large as the cranks of youths when physical changes and the sexual urge confuse them altogether. Marriage had proved a cure to several youths whose waywardness seemed very much like the outward signs of spiritual yearnings. Nanu should get married, thought his relatives. This time their persuasions proved fruitful. He submitted himself to undergo the ceremonies. His innate reluctance not blankly to oppose other people's views led him to go through the ceremonies. The wedding ceremonies, however, shook him up. He returned to his own celibate ways. The marriage was not consummated. He did not go to the bride's house.

Nor did he turn home. Nevertheless, the *Vatii* (barber) who had officiated as a marriage-broker wore down Nanu Bhakta's resistance and persuaded him at least to visit his wife.

He went and sat on the "half wall" in the verandah of the lady's house. She brought him sweets and plantains. Nanu Ashan took some plantains and giving some of them to the barber, ate one or two himself. After that, he got up and said to all the inmates in general and to no one in particular.

"People are born in this world with diverse objectives. You and I have different paths to tread. You would do well to follow yours. Let me follow mine."

So saying, he got up and walked away.

Avadhoota (Strange and Frightful in Form)

Nanu Swami went out into the world at large, as did all saints, who were eager to understand the secrets of life, cutting himself away from the bonds of flesh.

People saw him wandering from place to place, at all time of the night and day. They saw him on hilltops, they saw him in the dales, they saw him on the seashore and they saw him in jungles. Always thinking, thinking. They saw him saying his prayers or lost in deep meditation in the temples also. *Pandits* (scholars) were reminded of the description of *yogin* (ascetic) in the Gita "*Aniketa Sthiramathi*", a person whose abode is ever-changing but whose mind is always steady.

During that period in his life, Nanu Swami used to be a frequent visitor to Perunelly, the house of V.K.Krishnan Vaidiar. The large collection of religious books in Sanskrit and Tamil which Vaidiar had in his possession was his sole attraction there.

The Swami's determination to remain celibate called for great strength of will. Even so, it was not an easy task to conquer the urges of sex. We see him praying to Siva:

"Your third eye that commands
The worship of Narahari Moorthy
Did consume to ashes
The god Cupid, long long ago.

Why is he then bothering me now?
Consume him to ashes once again, Oh Lord."

Here, prayers serve him as means for attaining mental strength.

Another frequent visitor at Krishnan Vaidiar's house was Kunjan Pillai *(a Savarna)* known as Shanmukha Das and affectionately called Chattambi Swamigal. He was a great scholar, a sage, a *sanyasi* and a *yogin*(ascetic), all rolled into one. Nanu Ashan and Chattambi Swamigal met. As they were proceeding on the same path to spirituality, they fell in step and were together for days on end. Chattambi Swami introduced Sree Narayana Guru to Thaikkat Ayyavu, a Tamilian who had practised yoga to a very high stage, but had, for some reason or other, become a householder and an official.

Under Ayyavu, Nanu Ashan learned the practice of yoga.

4

THE 'TAPASWIN'

Nanu quickly grasped the lessons on yoga given by Ayyavu and so the Guru advised him to resort to secluded places in remote areas and practise yoga. For, as the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it :

> "A *yogin* should always try to concentrate his mind in solitude, having retired to a secret place, he should subdue his mind and body and get rid of his desires and possessions."
> "Serene and fearless, steadfast in the observance of celibacy and subdued in mind, he should sit in yoga, thinking on Me and intent on Me alone."
>
> *The Bhagavad Gita* VI, 10 & 14

Nanu Ashan went out into the wide world, seeking solitary locations suitable for *tapas* (penance), walking alone, with the "sun or the moon for his lamp and the spray of the wind in his hair," a lonely pilgrim in earnest search of ultimate wisdom.

What were the hills, forests and riverbanks where Nanu Ashan wandered, apparently aimless to all those who saw him, but inwardly firm in his quest for the realisation of *Brahma* residing within himself? No one knows. All that was gleaned about the apparently eventless and momentously significant days was the bits and pieces his disciples gathered from his occasional reminiscences. Unfortunately, there was no Boswell among them to note them down and later piece them together into a life-sketch. Murkot Kumaran, who wrote the earliest definitive biography of Sree Narayana Guru, had to secure the help of these disciples and obtain from them personally and through long letters information for his life of the Guru.

The Guru used to spend almost all his time in solitude in the wilderness eating fruits, leaves and roots. We have seen him in his boyhood days tasting and swallowing all types of exotic fruits and leaves of wild trees and shrubs, as if he were unconsciously preparing himself for the type of life he was now living.

He would take shelter in various caves from time to time. In these rough and ready forest dwellings, he was living amidst animals of the jungle, both wild and otherwise. He felt no fear, not even uneasiness about their nearness to him. "They will not harm you if you have no fear or anger towards them or any inclination to hurt them," was his frequent advice to his sanyasi disciples.

The jungle folk were accustomed to seeing him off and on. He partook of the food they gave him and shared with them whatever he himself had gathered.

But it was in the cave known as Pillathadam (boy's bed) on the crest of Maruthwa Mala that he was discovered by people from the plains.

5

THE CAVE

On the high crest of Maruthwa Mala there stands a spacious, airy, well-hidden cave that seems to have been specially cut out for *tapas*.

Its high, wide mouth welcomes you to come in. As you enter it, you find the cave is paved with pearl-white sand which furnishes you with a soothing bed. Spread a mat woven of wild grass, and you can sit in meditation or lie down in perfect calm. The murmur of the leaves lulls you to sleep. The song of the birds provides you with an arboreal chorus to wake you up at dawn.

The scenery around has to be seen to be believed. The cave faces west and, at your feet you have a sloping carpet of grass of various shades of green, flowers of variegated colours, the place shaded by trees. The rays of the setting sun shining through the foliage convert the skyscape into a lovely mosaic painted by nature. It is there that you feel that "nature imitates art more than art imitates nature." All these are laced by the white beach and the foam of the sea glistening under the tropical sun.

The Providential Discovery

The biographer Murkot Kumaran, in his search for first-hand information about the discovery of the Swami in this inaccessible cave, obtained second-hand information only, albeit of the most trustworthy type. One old lady, 75 years of age, named Chettyamma, narrated to him how her husband, an overseer, happened to be the first person to see the Swami and bring tidings of a *yogin* performing *tapas* in Pillathadam cave on Maruthwa mountain. Climbing up during one of his surveys, he espied a man in white, moving about in the cave. As he approached it and as his eyes got used to the darkness, the Swami came out to the mouth of the cave, and waved away two leopards who were, so to say, guarding the cave.

The overseer now felt safe and was emboldened to approach the swami with folded hands. What they talked about is not known.

Standing straight as a shaft, but gracefully supple, with a complexion that was fair and soft and clear, the radiant form that stood before him possessed a vibrant personality framed in the rough-hewn rocky doorway of the cave, with the semi-darkness inside serving as a sober background.

6

NANU THE 'YOGIN'

Nanu, the yogin left the heights of Maruthwa mountain as well as the solitary life in the cave, Pillathadom, and came down to the shining levels of the sea to mingle in society. He now lived in the world but was not of it.

This time, he went from temple to temple, in and out of Kerala, walking barefoot all the way, a true mendicant who partook of whatever foods pilgrims and pious householders offered him. If no one offered him anything on any day, he quietly starved. Engrossed in prayers and meditation or simply watching, as in a mirror, the world pass by, his bodily needs were his last concern. He slept wherever and at whatever place he happened to reach at night. "The bare earth for a bed, and one's own arm for a pillow" - that is how he has portrayed the life of a devotee.

The holy appearance, the kindly eyes, the soft caressing wise advice that assuaged your sorrows, the smile that soothed your wounds like a balm - those were among the manifest spiritual qualities of his which immediately drew people to him. Amidst all this, and actually crowning them all, there were this humility and self-effacement, the surest signs of an emancipated soul. They were powerful magnets that attracted worshipping crowds about him.

Simple, pious people ministered to him in their own way. At Suchindram temple, for instance, they even made him submit to being garlanded and taken around the temple in a procession. His habit of not protesting at such sincere, rustic, soulful ways was taken full advantage of by that happy-go-lucky crowd who enjoyed

all the din and bustle as important adjuncts of *bhakti*. To the average Indian, the greater the confusion created in a festival, the greater the merit that accrues to the devotee. One can picture with a smile how much Nanu Swami, who had an irrepressible sense of humour, would have enjoyed that ride.

Kanyakumari, Kulachal, Karimkulam, Poovar, Kovalam and Trivandrum were among the several sea-beaches where he wandered about for days on end, helping the poor in their daily chores, while they in turn offered him whatever they had.

At night, when birds were ensconced in their nests, beasts in their lairs and men in their homes, Nanu Swami would sit and pray, facing the sublime sea, meditate on the beach, and then sleep on the fish-nets lying there. Early morning when fishermen arrived, he would quietly walk away, or help them in their chores. They offered him what they ate: fish cooked in different forms. Swami liked fish and enjoyed doing manual labour. "This *sanyasi* does not disdain work. He lends a hand in our tasks. He brings us luck. He eats whatever we give him," they would remark among themselves. A very strange sort of Swami, wasn't he? Of course, there were people who laughed at him. It was only the simple fishermen and others who were like children that could come unto him in utter love and innocence.

A close disciple writes:

Nanu the Swami

"When fishermen gave him fresh, uncooked fish, he would accept that too, and take it to an old woman, living along with her only daughter on a hillock close by. The old woman would cook the fish and serve a meal with fish and a portion of her own meagre food. Noticing the dire poverty of the family, he taught them how to prepare coconut fibre out of husk, helping them thus to eke out their paltry income."

News spread that Nanu Swami, who had been so long performing *tapas*, was now a mendicant amidst the populace, performing wonders and curing people of even so-called incurable

diseases. Some believed that he was a *jnani*. Others thought he was a mere beggar. A few who knew his scholarly uncles felt sad that the heir of a respectable family should be wandering about like a man who had lost his balance of mind.

Cherukkan Vaidyar, a good *shikari* (hunter), well known in those days, saw one morning a man, a magnificent specimen of humanity, standing in the house of a Pulaya (Harijan) pulling out some roots or nuts from the fire in the hearth, while the housewife stood aside in awe and surprise. That person who had a green shawl round his shoulders was soon recognised as Nanu Swami by the Vaidyar, who was not at all surprised at the Swami's absolute unconcern about the observance of caste and custom. He went up and invited the Swami to his house. The Swami went with him and stayed there for a while.

Nairs, Christians and Muslims

Nairs, Christians, Muslims and Channars (low-caste Tamilians) were notable among those who respected the Swami. Among the Ezhavas, Dr. Palpu's house invariably received him with great regard and played the honoured host to the *sanyasin*. Dr Palpu's son later became the most famous disciple of Swami -Nataraja Guru.

Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, who was, as already mentioned, a close associate of the Swami, records the Swami's own recollections thus:

"I have lived for days with Muslims, partaken of their food along with them and from the same plate. Eaten flesh and fish. I used to play with their children, carrying their babies in my arms and feeding the hungry ones with my own hands."

It is also known that he had mastered Muslim mysticism and philosophy in those days. He had a great regard for the yogic practices of Muslims described by Dara Shikoh, the great mystic, the son of Shahjahan the Moghul emperor and the unfortunate brother of Aurangzeb. Muslims, too, were in agreement with the Swami's interpretation of the verses in the *Koran*. Great Muslim scholars in southern Travancore esteemed him highly.

There were Christians who respected him greatly. The peacock image in the temple consecrated by the Swami at Aruvipuram was the offering of a Christian, Marian Chattambi, who held him in high regard.

When a young Christian evangelist solicited him to be converted, the Swami chuckled: "Why? I am already a Christian."

Aruvipuram

His next appearance was at Aruvipuram, another enchanting spot by a riverside. The river Neyyar in Kerala originates in Agastyakootam in the Western Ghats, flows west and empties itself in the Arabian Sea at Poovar, enriching all the way down the lands on both sides of its course. About 35 kilometers west of its source, the river flows through juts of pointed rocks and falls straight down a precipice to form a deep pool, popularly known from days of old as *Shankaran Kuzhi*, the pool of Shankara or Siva. The rocks in their attempts to stop the flow of the river succeed only in increasing its liveliness by converting it into a fast and lovely cascade rumbling down the fall. It provides a beautiful sight where, after the monsoon the water is crystal-clear, enabling you to see the bottom, where the black rocks lie. A bird's-eye view would paint a picture of the river as a light green ribbon wherein the rocks appear as shimmering polka dots that add to the beauty of the place. The verdurous shores formed by a thick growth of tall trees give a depth to the scenery, adding to its eerie enchantment.

No one lived there and rarely did anyone go there either. The Swami's contemporaries have reckoned 1886 as the year in which he started his *tapas* in that spot of heavenly charm, which appears to have been once again specially prepared by Mother Nature for a *sanyasin* to live in. He lived there in solitude with constant thoughts about the source of misery in the world. This place, Cherukunnu, on the left bank of the river, had now become a landmark in the social, cultural and religious activities of Kerala's history. A hundred or so years ago, it was the fringe of a forest

inhabited by wild beasts and therefore frequented by royal hunters and their retinue. Of course, there were some religious-minded persons living in that quiet place in search of an escape from the din and bustle of crowds. Today it is a holy place for those who go there for prayers and peace. In every sense, therefore, it is one of the most charming spots in Kerala which soothe the frayed nerves of modern man. (Description by Murkot Kumaran)

News spread that Nanu Swami was now living in Aruvipuram in Cherukunnu and that he was a *siddha* (one who has attained spiritual powers, saint) who performed miracles.

Some saw him. They came back to the villages and towns and described what they had seen. His radiant personality grew in mystery in the very process of their description. Hyperbole is the hallmark of the report by ordinary folk.

People who came for *darsan* (holy vision) brought, as usual, offerings to the Swami. He gave them to those assembled there. A few others brought enough sweets to go round. The more practical devotees among them supplied a meal of rice and curry. The richer men brought rice and vegetables, cooked them there and served them hot and fresh. Holy days brought in bigger crowds. The place was fast becoming a place of pilgrimage and Nanu Swami was fast being idolised. That would not do, he thought. And so, he told those who were close to him that he would install an idol of siva for them to worship. He intended to do so on *Sivaratri*. (Murkot Kumaran)

Kumaran Asan describes the solemn scene thus:

"Sivaratri was only a few days away when Swami declared his intention of consecrating a *lingam* (Siva phallus) that night at that place. There were no resources nor were there materials and much less was there the time for building a temple. Swami did not ask for anything. "Let this flat rock be our pedestal. I shall dive into the river there and bring up a round shaped piece of rock.... That will serve us as a Sivalingam. That is all," he said.

The people around were only too happy to fall in with this plan. They erected a rough shamiana, as rough as the pedestal,

over the place and decorated it with palm leaves and flowers. Pilgrims came in to keep their customary sleepless vigil on Sivaratri at this spot. A company of nagaswaram musicians appeared, as if from nowhere. Flowers in plenty and a few temple lamps were the bare accessories which constituted the preparations for the ceremony. They were bare and meagre no doubt, but what did it matter, if they were so? The people's hearts were full of joy and hope, and filled with devotion.

"At dead of night Swami had a dip in the river. He came up after some time with a Sivalingam in his hands and walked into the make-shift temple and stood there with his eyes closed in deep meditation, his hands holding the Sivalingam to his chest, tears flowing down his cheeks, completely lost to the world. For full three hours, he stood still in that asana (posture) while the entire crowd rent the midnight air with continuous cries of, "*Om Namah Sivaya, Om Namah Sivaya*," for full three hours. The whole lot of them appeared to have only one mind, one thought, one prayer among them. "*Om Namah Sivaya* - Obeisance to Siva."

At three in the morning, Swami placed the *Sivalingam* on the pedestal, consecrated it, and performed *abhisheka* (holy bathing of idol).

A new era dawned in Kerala at that predawn hour on 10 February 1888. When a temple was built there later on, Sree Narayana Guru got the message of his life engraved in granite there:

"Here is a model abode
Where men live like brothers:
Bereft of the prejudice of caste
Or the rancour of religious differences"

He wanted Kerala to be that model; the whole world to be its manifestation. "One caste, One religion, One god for man," is his message which has become famous all over the world and toward which mankind is striving, halting and unsatisfactory though the progress seems to be.

But that does not matter. "Our ideals serve us, as the Pole Star guides the navigator at sea. His ship may never reach the Pole Star, but it reaches a safe harbour all the same."

7

THE ELECTRIC SHOCK

Consecration of an idol of Siva by Nanu Swami, administered an electric shock to the crowd assembled there. As Kerala was in any case, dubbed 'a lunatic asylum', an electric shock was perhaps quite the treatment indicated to restore sanity to that sick society.

This shock given at about the middle rung of the caste ladder, viz., the Ezhavas, was transmitted upwards to the Nambudiri Brahmins and downwards to the lowest among the several castes below the Ezhavas. Social reformation all round was the result of this shock treatment. It produced very strong and effective movements of reform among all the castes, such as the Nambudiris, the Nairs, the Ezhavas and the Pulayas, besides affecting other castes too. The leaders of these reform movements have themselves recorded how they were inspired by the movements initiated by Sree Narayana Guru.

The magnitude of this act of consecration of a Siva idol by the Guru can be better understood by a glance at the customs of the day. In Kerala, the Ezhavas and the castes below them were, as already stated, denied entry into Hindu temples. For that matter, they were forbidden even to walk along the public roads adjoining the temples. When the idol of a temple was taken in a procession round the town, the lower castes had to clear out of their own houses situated along the route of the procession.

The higher castes also who were allowed to enter the temples had to bear their own share of the indignities. Each caste had to stand at a prescribed distance from the holy shrine,

one behind the other, with the Brahmin standing nearest to the *sanctum sanctorum*. Even among the Brahmins, the higher groups alone could perform *pooja* (worship) inside the temple. The discrimination did not stop there either. Every *Poojari* cannot install an idol and consecrate it. A handful among the highest branch of the Brahmins alone had the divine right to do so. And yet, here was an Ezhava performing this most sacred of sacred ceremonies, knocking out the very bottom of the caste system and all that it stood for, at one stroke. No wonder, the people were taken aback.

Superstitious people expected the skies to fall. The intellectual elite raised their eyebrows. The orthodox decried the act. But when all was said and done, the protests were not overwhelming. It resounds to the credit of the broad-minded among the Brahmins and the higher castes of Kerala that they did not, "Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war." Genuine spirituality still commands respect from Indians as a whole, especially in Kerala. Or will that also be reckoned as a method in the madness of the Keralites? In any case, Sree Narayana Guru's commanding personality overcame all opposition.

Amidst all this hullaballo, a sprightly young Nambudiri asked the Guru what right he had as an Ezhava, to consecrate an idol of Siva.

The Guru replied with a disarming smile:

"I consecrated the Ezhava Siva."

That sparkling play of fanciful wit, so puckish in this whimsicality, silenced the orthodox objector. Who would have the heart to spoil the brilliance of that retort by further argument! Certainly not a Nambudiri; for the Nambudiris are well known for that type of *bon mots*.

One would like to fancy that the Nambudiri would have smiled, and pondered: "This wonderful man has usurped not only the Brahminical right to install an idol, but has also caught hold of our chief weapon, the witty retort, to deflect an attack." We see him fencing in this manner throughout life. The witticisms, adding salt and spice to the story of his life.

Controversies Silenced

Kerala nodded in appreciation of the brave act. The short chapter of sharp criticism was over. Sree Narayana Guru went on establishing one by one, year after year, Hindu temples on the pattern of the orthodox temples of the higher castes.

There are more than 30 temples of this type, dotting the map of Kerala, with one or two in Karnataka, a couple or so in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Thirty temples consecrated by an untouchable, and now functioning with aplomb and no one to object.

In one instance a few persons complained that the Swami had not consulted astrologers and ascertained the propitious time for installing an idol before consecrating it. Once more, the Swami replied in one sentence:

"We cast a horoscope only after a child is born, and not the other way about, don't we? The idol has been sanctified. Now you may please cast the horoscope."

That was an eye-opener to those who made a fetish of observing propitious times for every little act.

Later on, objections came from the rationalists. An editor of a newspaper asked him at Trichur where the final touches in the construction of a temple were being given.

"Swami! Are we not encouraging superstition by encouraging all this worship of idols, or rather stones, if I may put it bluntly?"

The Guru smiled that charming smile again, this time with a tinge of pity in it. "People worship God and not a stone." And then, he added with a chuckle" "At least not until other people tell them so. One has deliberately to confuse them, before they will begin to think on those lines."

Here, once more, we have that spontaneous reply couched in the simplest of words, complete in a single sentence, conveying an idea that could have become a full-fledged speech in anyone else. The intellectual propounds, the *Jnani* reveals!

Some other critics had other grounds of objection. According to them a *yogin* was wrong in consecrating idols and persuading people to worship them. That question is still being asked.

Sree Narayana Guru was following the *Gita* in this matter. A *yogin*, it is true, has no need for idols as aids to concentration, but the people required them as steps to rise towards spirituality; and so the Guru provided them with what they yearned for. As the *Gita* puts it:

"Let no enlightened man unsettle the minds of ignorant men who are attached to their work. Himself doing all works with good faith, he should make others do as well."

Sree Narayana Guru observed that the *Avarnas* were worshipping their ancestors, tribal heroes, heroines, tragic persons whose life-stories had the sublime qualities of Greek tragedies. They also worshipped hills and rocks, stones and brooks, snakes and other fearsome creatures, spirits that spread pestilence, or created miseries all around; in short, everything in life. He could understand all that and never said a word against them. He could not, however, tolerate the drunken brawls and the sacrifice of fowls by hundred in the name of worship. These were corrupt practices that had to be stopped. And he stopped them wherever he came face to face with them. He never lectured. He simply said, "We must stop this," and people, as simply, obeyed him. In more than a hundred places, he unseated the gods whose names had associations with the killing of birds and consumption of liquor, replacing them by idols of Siva, Subramania and Ganesa and instituted *poojas* of the type performed in temples dedicated to them. Such *poojas* are technically known as "*Uthama pooja*" (the highest form of idol worship).

In a village near the present writer's family-house, the Guru walked into a place of worship while drunken brawls were in full swing. The authorities of the temple stood up as one man and with folded hands, received him as an honoured guest. They offered him a seat, wiping the dust off it with their own hands. When the Guru said calmly that these barbarous rites should be stopped, they did not dare to disobey. But would the devotees who were all dead drunk, agree? After holding whispered consultations among them, they put the blame on "Chathan", the deity himself.

"We have no objection, Swami. But we are afraid to displease the god Chathan," was their reply. The Guru smiled and said:

"We shall take care of Chathan. Will you please appease Chathan Maistry here?"

Needless to say, the income from the sale of all these fowls sacrificed went to Chathan, the Maistry. The Guru smiled; the authorities laughed, the crowd roared. The contagious laughter swept Chathan Maistry off his feet. He agreed. The drunken brawls and the 'bloody' ceremonies were stopped at that shrine. People returned home and in the calm atmosphere of their houses, ruminated how vested interests had corrupted religions all the world over. Once more, the Guru lances an abscess with an epigram honed at the stone of wit.

What were the ideas of the Guru in establishing Sree Narayana temples? A few talks he had with the leaders of the community cleared up the issue.

8

SREE NARAYANA TEMPLES

We have seen that the Guru worked for wiping out the degradation of worship that had taken place in the rites performed by the *Avarnas*. He did not criticise the gods they worshipped or the legends that formed the foundation of that worship, but only the mode of worship. Nevertheless, he wanted to substitute those old images which had an association with animal sacrifice and drunkenness, and replace them by gods whose temples did not have such associations.

He observed the way to progress which the people themselves were taking and led them along the same path, fully confident that he could bring them where he wanted them; somewhat like a clever boatman who rows along with tide to bring the boat to the right destination.

He noticed them crowding at the temples of the high castes, standing at the prescribed distance outside, tying up their offerings in small pieces of cloth and throwing them over the wall. The *prasadam* or remains of offerings to the god were thrown back to them, again over the wall.

If that was the path they were anxious to take, it did not matter if the temples would not let them in, he would take the temples to them. And that was exactly what he did in establishing the same type of temples for the Ezhavas. All the same, the Sree Narayana temples were like and yet unlike the old temples in the land.

The Function Temples

He did not see any need for building temples in the old manner,

spending a lot of money. Money should not be lavished on festivals, fire-works and such other wasteful items. Large airy rooms where people could assemble with ease and listen with comfort to dissertations on religion and other topics would be more appropriate. Every temple should have gardens around it. There should be schools and technical schools too as ancillaries to these temples. The money received as offerings should be spent for the benefit of the people.

He was against digging tanks as adjuncts to temples as far as possible because temple tanks are very rarely kept clean. Bathing cubicles with overhead pipes were preferable.

Sree Narayana temples are as a rule kept very clean, they have good gardens around, the temple tanks have clean water. There are schools ranging from the primary schools to high schools attached to temples. A few technical schools, hostels for working girls, libraries of religious books and other similar institutions are already there and more of them are being continually built.

The officiating priests in these temples are members of the lower castes, each one having successfully undergone nine long years' training in *mantra* (spell), *tantra* (mystical formula for attaining supernatural powers), *Sastras* (scriptures), *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *adhyatmic* (spiritual) philosophy. This educational system is aimed at making each priest a well-rounded personality deeply versed in religious lore. They are not to be priests who just conduct a ceremony in a mechanical manner, repeating *mantras* like parrots.

Sree Narayana Guru did not accept the contention of the so-called modern-minded persons who apprehended that temples would very soon become useless buildings.

The Guru: "How can that be? Temples should be kept clean. People will come there, bathed and fresh, wearing clean clothes. An assemblage of such people intent on prayer will induce good thoughts in all. Their talks will soon turn to noble ideals. They will remember God. Breathe fresh air. Some should perform *poojas* and go on fast. All these would calm their minds, enabling them to see their mundane worries from soothing angle. Faith will dispel greed in some others. Everything depends on faith. Are not these benefits? Temples are necessary. Do not misuse them, and then you will find their utility."

If despite all these benefits there comes a time when people lose their faith in such temples too, what then? Swami had foreseen this objection also.

At that time these temple buildings could be used for other purposes. Buildings, like food, are always wanted. And unlike food, which disappears when eaten, buildings will remain there for constant use, although their use may be different at different times. The Guru even suggested on different occasions that they may be used as schools, libraries, meeting halls or even as weaving sheds.

He was not unaware of a growing disbelief in God during the twenties of this century. Therefore, he asked people who came to him for installing temples:

"Do people still want temples? Will they not accuse me of putting up stones?"

"We want them," they replied, and he gave them what they wanted. (*Vide* Murkot Kumaran's biography of the Guru.)

Raison D'etre of Idol Worship

Idol worship is, after all, only one of the lower steps in Hindu religion:

The highest is oneness with God
The next, silent meditation and understanding
The third step is worship of idols
The fourth pilgrimage and performance of homas (sacrifices).

This is a popular Sanskrit verse which Dr. Radhakrishnan used to quote. Swami realised that the time had come to show the people these higher steps also. He did not preach that philosophy, he lived it. He built temples with different idols, emphasising in granite structures that idols were symbols, used as aids to concentration.

Indians have always tended to retain their ancient beliefs and mould them - sometimes perhaps to distort them - in such a

way as to mirror a new social philosophy or to fit them into a new metaphysical scheme. The religious leaders have at times succeeded, at least among the educated, in transforming the very patterns of beliefs; for Indian myths as well as the religions around which they have grown are closely tied to the social temper. In the nineteenth century, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, Raja Rammohan Roy and others interpreted mythology in the light of the *Upanishads* to make the same old myths serve the modern religious renaissance in Hindu religion initiated by them. The great body of myths has also been used, as mentioned earlier, for ages past as source materials for symbols with which to express metaphysical concepts. In other words, the learned man accepted the primitive beliefs and deities, and wove them with suitable modifications into the new spiritual system by means of legends that narrate the evolution of a village goddess, into goddess *Shakti* (energy, strength), the principle of primordial energy, or Siva, her consort, Vishnu, the Lord of the Universe, etc.

All these changes turned the old simple straightforward tales of wonder and mystery into complicated conceptions that were confusing to the common men. They were, therefore, thrown back on earlier beliefs whose attendant ways of worship they could understand better. The deities and idols worshipped by the *Avarnas* of Kerala belonged to this type of religion.

The deities are not devils; *Avarnas* believed them to be gods. Outsiders, even when they are Indians, find it difficult to understand this in the same way as the Europeans found it difficult, at first, to understand Hindu religion. Even those Indians who have studied these pre-Hindu religions have approached the subject wearing the Western glasses of a scientific outlook.

There is space only to quote one instance, to show how the insiders see them. The man with the Western scientific approach condescendingly declares: "They have a fearful goddess who is represented as devouring children!"

A society in which every pregnancy meant nine months of anxiety, every safe delivery a narrow escape from death, every childhood a continuous fight for life, the goddess (or nature) becomes a terrific goddess, swallowing children. The Shakespearean expression, "Nature is red in teeth and claws," has only to be pictured and dramatised to get at this pre-hindu deity's form. The same argument could clarify the mystery of the other gods in Kerala. They are not demons by any means. The people conceived them as gods.

By the time the Guru started his mission of effecting revolutionary changes in faith, several factors had prepared the ground for him in Kerala. The seeds of change he sowed did not fall on rocks or sand or thorns, but on fertile ground. For instance, the beginning of antenatal care, the gradual increase of proper sanitation and health care, had rendered the old goddess and other deities into vanishing conceptions. But who would replace them and by what? Kerala was waiting for a sage who had crossed the ocean of *samsara* (worldliness) and arrived at the "other shore" as it were, to do this.

When, therefore, Sree Narayana Guru appeared on the scene, he was welcomed by a people who were ready for a change. The Guru provided them with "Aryan gods" as the first step and took them up the stairs by a series of temples where the symbols rose in internal significance until at last the Advaita Ashrama at Alwaye gave all believers in God, to whatever creeds they belonged, a place to meet together, talk together, pray together, live together. The story of these temples deserves a chapter to itself.

9

EVOLUTION OF IDOL WORSHIP

Sree Narayana Guru was now the accepted Guru of lakhs. They consented to abandon the consumption of alcohol and the killing of goats and fowls as part of their worship. Many of them even agreed to the replacement of the earlier deities by gods from the orthodox Hindu pantheon, and obtained the consent and holy services of the Guru in installing Siva, Subramania or Ganesa in their places of worship.

After the consecration of the Siva temple at Aruvipuram, Deveswaram temple in Chirayinkizhu, Vakkam, was the next temple instituted by the Guru. The deity there is Subramania, the son of Siva.

In 1893, he replaced an old type of Bhagavathi temple at Kulathur, a place north of Trivandrum, and consecrated there an idol of Siva. Kunnumpara temple, very near Kovalam which is now an international tourist centre, is another of the important temples instituted by him. It stands on a precipitous rock and is constructed most beautifully, built of stones rough-hewn from rocks. In the midst of rocks, there is a spring of crystal-clear water. Anyone who stands on the premises of this Subramania temple would be so moved by the divine beauty of the rocky hill, the temple on the rock and the sublime scenery facing the sea, that his heart would leap up in silent prayer and he would stand there with hands folded in worship.

As a matter of fact, the Guru generally chose divinely beautiful spots for Sree Narayana temples. That was how and why he chose Varkala one of the most entrancing spots in Kerala as his religious headquarters.

Varkala

In 1904, when the Guru visited Varkala, the irresistible beauty of the hill east of it so pleased him that he built a small *parnasala* (forest dwelling) there and stayed in it, tending a vegetable garden. Nature's pristine beauty has attracted the holy men of India from time immemorial. In other words, Mother Nature always defies as it were, the *sanyasi*'s detachment from her earthly attractions.

The Guru could not remain in solitary meditation for more than a few days. People came to know of his presence and once more they came to him, at first in two's or three's, but very soon in larger and larger numbers.

Some government land there was bought for him, while some more lands adjacent thereto were donated by munificent landlords who offered them to the Guru to be utilised according to his wishes.

In a short while, the crowds gathered in such large numbers that Varkala too acquired the character of place of pilgrimage. This place had a sanctity of its own for centuries in the past and is known as the Varanasi of the South. On new moon day in the month of *Sravana* (July 15th - August 14th), large numbers of people used to gather there at the old Janardhana temple near the sea-beach to perform the obsequies of their ancestors. The *Avarnas* (and others too) were being duped by the poojaris who fleeced them of money without performing proper ceremonies. In the year 1904 on August 14, the Guru arranged for appropriate ceremonies to be performed at Varkala for those who would come to the Sivagiri Hill, thus saving them from being duped.

The income accrued was utilised, two years later, for establishing a school for all and a night school for people of the Kurava caste and others who were unable to attend the day school.

In 1912, a temple with an image of Saraswati was installed there, along with a Vaidika Vidyalaya (Vedic school). While the temples in other places were erected at the request of the people, the *Sarada Matham* (monastery), as the Saraswati temple is known,

and the Vaidika Vidyalaya were the Guru's own creations.

The day of the inauguration saw one of the grandest ceremonies witnessed in those parts. People arrived like a flood flowing down the hills. The whole crowd of over 20,000 did not require even a single policeman to control them. The entire hill was gaily adorned by flags and festoons of varied colours. The caparisoned elephants whose gold-plated ornaments covering their foreheads reflected the yellow, orange and red rays of the setting sun, provided an unforgettable sight. Instrumental music and an assorted assembly of drums, folk-songs, folk-dances and processions, all provided, as Kumaran Asan puts it, "a heavenly sight never before experienced by any one of the huge crowd assembled there."

"This hill," said the president of the occasion, C. Krishnan, who was a great disciple of the Guru, a leader of the Ezhavas, "will be the Sringeri (headquarters of one of the four Mutts created by Sankara) or our people. It will function as a beacon light all in our endeavour towards enlightenment, mutual help and prosperity of all of us, down-trodden people as we were, so far."

The Guru illustrated through this temple that idol-worship was not the be-all and end-all of Hindu religion. Here, no traditional poojas are performed. It is known as a Madhom (monastery) and not a Kshetra (temple). It is an octagonal structure with many coloured ornamental glasses shimmering in the sunlight and illuminating the interior with a soft light of variegated colours. The surrounding circular half-wall gives you the impression that the Madhom is placed on a silver plate. The milk-white sand, spotless and entirely devoid of dust compels you to remove your shoes on you own, without being directed by notice-board.

The image of Saraswati or Sarada is a lovely statue imbedded inside a lotus of marble. It serves as the concretised symbol of the Guru's message: "Educate and be enlightened." There are no offerings of food, no processions, no worship there. The devotees can have *darshan* of Sarada Devi (Goddess Sarada), pay respects to the goddess, sing hymns, or be lost in meditation.

Temple of Different types

Karamukku temple has only a lighted lamp as a symbol.

The Vedas, *upanishads* and all the treatises on Hindu religion speak of the rise towards spirituality as progress from darkness to light. The Guru pronounced, "Let there be light" and simply placed the lamps on the altar prepared for it.

When a lamp is lit, we feel the presence of the spirit more strongly. No auspicious function is conducted without a lighted lamp. This is true of almost all religions, not excluding those that do away with symbols.

At the Murukumpuzha temple the Guru placed a slab with the words *Satyam* (truth), *dharmam* (religion, duty), *Daya* (Compassion), *Sneham* (love), etched on it. Anything would do, if it helps you to concentrate, was the idea. The greater the noble thoughts which a symbol evokes, the greater is the effect.

The highest pinnacle of symbolic images consists in the esoteric syllable *Aum*. In Kalavamcodam temple, he asked the devotees to get him a mirror. An artist was instructed to erase the mercury coating at the back, so as to project the letter *Aum* in front. Thus, Aum becomes the idol in that temple. And this is the image which has been widely mistaken for a mere mirror. It is not a mirror, but *Aum* etched on a mirror.

'Aum'

Everybody is aware of the supreme significance of *Aum* in Hindu religion. The *Kathopanishad* says: "That word which all the Vedas declare, which all austerities proclaim and on which men concentrate when they lead the life of a religious student - that word I tell you briefly is *Aum*." According to the *Mandukya upanishad* "The past, the present and the future - all this is only the syllable *Aum*. And whatever else there is that transcends the three-fold time that too is only the syllable *Aum*."

After the Guru consecrated the writing of *Aum*, what is there left for the devotee to follow, except the realisation of the Brahman in himself?

Thus do we come to the institution of Advaita Asrama founded by the Guru at Alwyae.

Advaita Asrama

After completing the arrangements at Sivagiri, the Guru established an Advaita Asrama at Alwyae. The site of this building too is enchanting. Simple in architecture, it contains a prayer-hall where the Hindus, the Christians and the Muslims can, and do pray together, each according to his own faith. There was a Sanskrit school in the asrama where Christian and Muslim students also study. The hostel attached to it is also occupied without any distinction of caste or religion. There is an ordinary school functioning there. The Advaita Asrama (hermitage, monastery), true to its name, does not have a temple or idol or anything of that nature attached to it. Students read religious literature and no religion is excluded from the collection of books in the Asrama library. It is now converted into an English High School of the general type.

10

ONE RELIGION FOR MAN

The life and activities of Sree Narayana Guru exemplify that he was a *Vedantist*, (believer in Vedanta) pure and simple. He had the yogic experience of a Supreme Identity "in which oppositions and all contraries, even of being and not being are resolved." Through that experience he realised that the worlds and gods of the ordinary man's religion, "were levels of reference and symbolic entities which were neither places nor individuals but states of being realisable within oneself." The characters and events in the Puranas may not be all historically authentic. Nevertheless, they possess the "superior reality of religious mythology." The greatest of the Puranas, the *Bhagavatha*, states that the tales are not to be taken as literal truth. They are intended to lead men to wisdom and detachment. These and other great truths were demonstrated by the Guru to the masses through a series of idols of Siva, Subramania, Ganesa and a lighted lamp, a plaque with a great thought engraved on it, and *Aum*, the mystic syllable, engraved on a mirror, capping it all by an Advaita Asrama where devotees of different faiths meditated in the same prayer-hall, studying and living together as partners in a common quest.

The entire programme was a demonstration in concrete images, and finally in the absence of images which represent the higher significance of idol-worship. Through that process, the Swami taught people to apprehend the idea that religious rites so far practised by them could be adapted towards a visible representation (if one may use that expression here) of the Vedantic doctrine of the non-duality of the Divine Being. They

had only to progress along this path. The way had been thrown open to them.

No other sage or saint had concretised these various steps as Sree Narayana Guru had done. He was unique in teaching idol worshippers, in this manner, how to understand their own time honoured practices in a better light, a light the would illuminate their onward path toward spirituality.

As Anand Coomaraswami puts it, "One had to believe in order to understand, and one had to understand in order to believe." That, in short, is one of the paradoxes in spiritual advancement. While the idols of different significance illustrated how "belief leads to understanding", the other side of the medal, i.e. "the need to understand in order to believe" remained to be satisfied. The two processes interact and function simultaneously. They are being separately dealt with here, simply because that is the only logical means of analysing this composite concept.

C. V. Kunhuraman, one of the greatest disciples of Sree Narayana Guru, a thinker, a scholar and a social reformer of first rank and writer of lucid, penetrating, persuasive prose, suffused with bubbling humour, was one of band of great followers of the Swami who revolutionised social thinking and metamorphosed the religious atmosphere of Kerala. True, he worshipped the Guru, this side of idolatry. But he would not believe anything - even if it be the Guru who said it - unless he was intellectually convinced. His weekly newspaper *Kerala Kaumudi* was one of the great papers of the day, read avidly by the common people. He wanted his readers to be convinced of the Swami's preaching. The Swami obliged and explained thus:

"The aim of all religions is one. Once the different rivers run into the sea all of them merge into it; the differences disappear.

"The aim of religion is to lift the thought of man towards the summit. After that is achieved, each individual will find his way to it, on his own.

"For the man who has experienced the ultimate truth, the aid of religion is no longer needed. He becomes the source of religion for other men.

"The Buddha did not attain the ultimate in enlightenment by studying Buddhism. He realised. He preached what he had realised. And those teachings became Buddhism. Jesus Christ never had any use for Christianity, did he? But the followers of the Buddha had to depend on Buddhism and the followers of Christ needed Christianity. This is true of other religions also.

"We do not know who were the architects of the *Vedas*. Nor do we need to know them. The thoughts they propound are of eternal significance. But ordinary men who are unable to grasp their meaning require other religious works that explain how these eternal truths can be applied in daily life.

"At the same time, the seers who explain that eternal truths should ensure that the well of religion is undefiled.

"Swami Dayananda Saraswathi accepted the Vedas as the foundation of his teachings. Even so, he discarded those parts of the Vedas which he considered to be artificial additions to them. This discrimination, however, has to be exercised by Acharyas, who know what they are discarding and why.

"Wars between countries will cease when one country is defeated. Religious wars and communal strives will have no end because no community can be annihilated. As they have to live together and cooperate in all walks of life after the fighting is over, animosities created by strife poison the entire country.

"If religious strife is to end, everyone should be taught the other man's religion and he should learn it with an open mind.

"That will show us all, that different religions do not differ in fundamentals. It is such a realisation of the fundamentals which is meant by the expression, 'one religion for man'.

"You say that there appears to be a strong move for mass conversion of the down-trodden to other religions?

"Religion has two aspects: The inner and the outer. Which of these do they want to change? If it is in the external aspects that they want a change, then it is social reformation that they are after. As for internal change, such a transformation is taking place continually in all people, and it occurs in accordance with one's own mental development. The process is a natural one which cannot

be brought about by anyone else on your behalf. Saints can only show you the way. The journey is yours.

"A Hindu or Christian or a member of any other religion should forgo his religion as soon as he ceases to believe in it.... cowardice and insincerity alone persuade you to remain in a religion once you stop believing its tenets. The continuance of such a person in any religion is not good, either for him or for the religion concerned.

"Conversely, those who get converted for wordly gain will only defile the purity of the religion which they join. It is bad for any religion to increase the number of unbelievers in its congregation. (The kingdom of God is within you. Conversion to a particular religion should be to realise that truth and not for the attainment of wordly wealth.)

"The elite who argue that conversion of Hindus to some other religion is indicated by the excrescences and corruption that have vitiated Hinduism are really making out a case for reformation of Hinduism. That is what they should attempt. (Those thinkers should not desert the arena and leave the masses without leadership.)

"For that matter, however, there is no such religion that may be called Hinduism. Foreigners styled the people of Hindusthan as Hindus. Therefore, if by Hinduism one denotes the religion of 'Hindus', then Christianity and Islam professed by thousands of inhabitants here should also be called Hinduism. Nobody says so, and no one will accept such a definition. Today Hinduism means the entire conglomeration of an immense variety of beliefs belonging to an entire scale of values which spans a considerable hiatus that exists in the matter of customs, manners, rites and philosophy among different groups and believers. *Veda, Mimamsa* (explanation), *Dvaita* (duality), *Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Saiva, Sakteya, Vaishnava* - all these are forms of Hinduism (not excluding the innumerable modes of primitive beliefs that differ from place to place and caste to caste.) They exist at different levels of spiritual development. If this entire gamut of beliefs can be called one religion, viz. Hinduism, then all religions - Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, etc., can also be collectively known as 'one religion'.

"If the religion preached by its founder, and subsequently elaborated into different branches by his followers, can be called one religion and given the name of the founder, the spiritual tenets preached by different Acharyas can also, by an extension of this principle, be termed as one religion. People should see the phenomenon of unity in diversity as it exists between different religions." C.V. had nothing more to ask.

Conference of Religions (1924)

Earlier to this dialogue, Sree Narayana Guru had held a conference of religions at which Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Parsi thinkers and leaders gave discourses on the various religions. The spirit of the discourses was set by the Swami in a pamphlet entitled:

"To know and to make known, not to argue and to vanquish."

The motto was writ large on the gate and in various parts of the assembly. It was written on the dais, too, serving as a backdrop to the speakers, and as a background to their discourses.

The opening speech approved by and read on behalf of the Guru explained the main theme of unity among the religions detailing how, outward differences notwithstanding, an inner unity prevailed.

All the speakers who were devoted followers of their faiths, well-versed in religious literature other than theirs, eloquently expatiated on their own religious teachings, bearing in mind the words of the motto that were to provide the spirit of their dissertations. This was the first Conference of Religions held in India. It was conducted in the Advaita Asrama at Alwaye on Sivaratri day in 1924.

The immense crowds of devotees who used to assemble at Alwaye on that day had an engaging feature common to all Indian crowds that assemble at religious festivals. They had tarried and worshipped at every shrine on the way, whether it was the Sri Krishna Temple at Guruvayur, or the Bhagavati temple at

Kotungalloor, or even a shrine belonging to some group or other of indigenous Hindu-fold in Kerala. Geography alone decided the particular shrine or shrines at which they worshipped. Simple religious people have always instinctively believed in the oneness of all deities without any philosophical persuasions. They were like children. That crowd reminded the educated elite of Christs words: "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." In the case of the masses who assembled at Alwaye on Sivaratri day, belief had led to understanding. Here at this conference, next door at Advaita Asrama, understanding was lending support to their instinctive beliefs.

The illiterate people who listened to stories from the Puranas at temples, festivals and places of pilgrimage had also learnt in the legends, litanies, prayers and songs, that each god or goddess is the god of all gods or the supreme mother of all. In their own childish manner, therefore, they did not find it strange to worship saints of other religions also. Offerings by the Hindus at some of the Christian and Muslim shrines and vice versa are common throughout Kerala. The Guru elevated this primitive belief into the essential oneness of religion, and gave it depth of meaning and converted it into faith based on reason. They who understood through belief now believed through understanding. They had gained ears to hear and eyes to see.

Ever since that day, the holding of a "conference of all religions" had become an annual feature at Alwaye. Not only that. No function in honour of Sree Narayana Guru anywhere at any time is complete today without a conference of religions. Distinguished speakers on these occasions belong to all religions. Bishops of different Christian denominations are there. Muslim scholars who expound the philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru to the astonishment of Hindus are there. However, these meetings are, more often than not, conducted on the precincts of the Sree Narayana temples. Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims assembled at Hindu temple festivals came together in unison by their respect for Sree Narayana Guru. It is the most inspiring, soul-stirring

sight for any man to see. Believers and atheists can be seen seated side by side on the dais when the Guru is being honoured.

Advaita philosophy was brought out of the closets of sages and scholars into the open, common grounds by the Guru.

A Motley Set

A glance at the men who organised the first conference of religions produces a delightful smile in any one who takes into account their different and differing mental make-up. Swami's irrepressible humour was expressed not only in his sayings, but also in these actions.

There was C. V. Kunhuraman who, as has been said before, refused to believe unless he was intellectually convinced. Ayyappan, known popularly as Sahodaran Ayyappan who had the epithet prefixed to his name in consideration of the Sahodara Sangham (The Organisation of Brotherhood) which he had founded was an agnostic and a firebrand in the field of social reform, but all the same a devotee of Swami and one of the greatest social reformers in Kerala. The motto quoted earlier in this chapter was formulated by him at the Guru's behest. T. K. Madhavan, a Hindu who conducted a satyagraha for establishing the right of the untouchables to walk along a public road around the Vaikom temple in 1924, an untiring fighter on behalf of the down-trodden, and an indefatigable personage who brought Mahatma Gandhi himself down to Vaikom and Kerala to bless his ventures, was there. Swami Satyavratan who had been initiated into *sanyasa* by the Guru was the master of ceremonies. A Hindu *sanyasin*, a rationalist, an agnostic and a *bhakta* - those personages formed the most incongruous set of disciples of the Guru who were behind the conference of religions.

In fact, his great disciples were men who had the courage of their conviction. T. K. Madhavan was a Hindu. C.V. Kunhuraman, a rationalist and yet a believer. Asan was the Vivekananda of Sree Narayana Guru. Dr. Palpu was the greatest social reformer of all time. Murkot Kumaran was one to whom the word of the Guru was gospel truth. They edited different journals where they argued

with one another and had verbal fights in which no punches were pulled. And yet in the presence of the Guru they were like kittens. The masses who had looked upon them as tigers were amazed to see them thus metamorphosed before the Guru. The good humour with which they hailed one another, slapping each other on the back, pervaded over all the people who had assembled. Hindsight after a period of fifty years makes one feel now that, most probably the Guru saw their verbal fisticuffs as the innocent tumblings of kittens of the same mother. He never tried to reconcile their views. He just drove the chariot, four in hand, drawn by them at varying angles along the straight and narrow path of spiritual progress. How many years and what an amount of living it has taken for some of us to understand the Guru's ways one by one!

For instance, looking up references, one notices that the Guru did not preach religious tolerance. The reason for it is also clear now. Tolerance is not a good word. We tolerate ideas and customs which we do not approve.

When Sahodaran Ayyappan approached the Guru for his advice saying that C. V. Kunhuraman and others were contemplating whether Ezhavas should *en masse* be converted to Christianity or Buddhism, the Guru's reply was as usual cryptic, to the point, and devastating:

"I understand that there is corruption in Buddhism also. Is not Christianity a holy religion? Are all Christians good?"

Three questions which were answers, too knocked the bottom out of the argument for mass conversion of Ezhavas and other depressed classes.

It was in this context that he made a casual remark arising out of the topic of discussion, a remark which has become one of his greatest messages.

"Whatever be the religion, it is enough if man becomes good."

11

ONE CASTE FOR MAN

Sree Narayana Guru provided guidelines on religion to the people at large - people who had to live an active rather than a contemplative life. He wanted them to understand that religion was not a mere formula or a set of rites and ceremonies, but a way of life. It permeated all life and was devoid of differences between the sacred and the profane.

The metaphysics of *Advaita* is based on soul-force which should form the ultimate impulse of our normal principles in life. Without that sublime impulse, our morality would become one of convenience only, where honesty at its best would be, as Bernard Shaw put it, a matter of mere policy.

Conversely, *Advaita* philosophy becomes pointless unless it teaches men to treat their fellowmen as equals. In Kerala, the greatest impediment to such conduct was the abominable caste system. Naturally, therefore, the Guru's message of universal love was expressed in the idiom of the people of Kerala, when he said : *One caste for man.*

He did not command that the householder should rise up and have the mystic experience of a supreme identity with the ONE. They were not to worry themselves about a fuzzy understanding of *Vedanta* either. They were simply to love their fellowmen as themselves and it would follow as the day the night, they would proceed towards universal love, love of the Lord, our God.

The famous saying of Jesus Christ that there are only two commandments comes strongly to mind in his context.

"The Lord our God is one Lord.
And thou shalt love the Lord thy God

With all thy heart, and with all thy
Soul, and with all thy mind, and
With all thy strength; this is the first
Commandment."
And the second is like this, namely:
"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.
There is no other commandment
Greater than these."

St.Mark 12/29-30

The awful atrocities committed by the higher castes on the lower castes have been mentioned earlier. The fact, however, is that no caste including the Namboodiri Brahmin was exempt from the miseries and ignominies suffered on account of the superstitions and customs prevalent in Kerala. The eldest son alone of a Nambudiri could marry within the caste, leaving many a Nambudiri lady to suffer compulsory maidenhood all her life or become one of the several wives of a Nambudiri, who could in some cases be old enough to be her father. Their sufferings can be grasped better by reading the novels and short stories written by great Nambudiri women writers than by reading dry pages of history. The younger members could have morganatic connections with Nair women, but the children were not only deprived of inheritance, but were also forbidden to touch their father, lest they pollute him! Sree Narayana Guru never raised his voice against the higher castes because he realised that the villain of the whole piece was not any caste or individual, but superstition.

The whole social milieu would have made you laugh if it were not for the tragic implications behind these farcical situations. Oilmen were a caste by themselves. But even among them, the oilcrushers formed a caste inferior to the oil-mongers. Even people of the same caste would not intermarry if they happened to live on the opposite sides of certain rivers. Sometimes even a road would do the trick. You may marry into a caste, but your wife would be forbidden from entering the kitchen in your house.

Truly could one say that the Kerala of those days was a "Wonderland" of superstitions.

The sad part of it all was that the caste system functioned by a series of kicks, the last man, poor fellow, kicking the cat. In this hierarchy of kicks, the Ezhavas too were by no means innocent. While they yearned for admission into temples of the higher castes, some of the temples consecrated for them by the Guru were not thrown open to castes below them. In other ways, too, they tried to maintain their superstitious superiority over other.

Swami admitted the lowest castes into the institutions at Varkala and Alwaye. Several Ezhava leaders followed suit and had the lowest caste boys as domestic servants and cooks. The implication of such a practice can be appreciated better when it is remembered that in the India of those days, a domestic servant soon became, so to say, a member of the family. Those of us Indians who are over forty years of age still remember how old domestic servants used to chastise us children, just like uncles. Castes came closer to one another - when the lower caste people were admitted into that elastic family circle.

The Ezhavas who number several lakhs were divided into Thiyyas, Chovans, Thandans, etc. They too did not intermarry. Swami's advent very soon moulded them into one community throughout Kerala. The temples, institutes, hostels, etc. of the Ezhavas were thrown open to all castes. As Murkot Kumaran put it: "Even Brahmins were now permitted temple entry."

When several branches of the Ezhavas who had so far lived more or less in closed circles were brought into one big community, thereby becoming the largest caste, the Nairs and others too combined together and formed bigger groups of societies for there own betterment. Further, the repercussions of Sree Narayana Guru's activities resulted in all castes of Kerala opening their eyes and taking vigorous action to reform their own customs and rites. By this time, i.e. the early decades of the twentieth century, the reform movement and activities of the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Servants of India Society

had spread their influence in Kerala society, thereby accelerating and informing the social movements here with modernising tendencies.

The Nambudiris of Kerala, who were counted as the most orthodox of Brahmins, now became one of the foremost of radical communities in India. Their revolutionary activities on the fields of widow remarriage, etc. were most amazing. The Nairs formed a society on the lines of the Servants of India Society and effected most significant changes in social life. The Pulayas stood up as men conscious of their rights. Happily, however, there was no violent animosity in Kerala in those days towards such activities by different castes.

The seed for it all was sown by Sree Narayana Guru who had thus in his own unobtrusive way upturned the virgin soil of orthodoxy and brought forth a goodly harvest of welcome changes within a short span of 50 years. Kerala is unique in that the untouchable castes here have progressed much more and much faster than in the other States of India.

This great progress was achieved without shedding a single drop of blood. Although the earlier struggles by the lower castes against oppression had produced violent fights with the vested interests, the movement for self-dependence in their rise in the social field under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru was obstructed, if at all, in a more civilised manner. As against that, there were famous instances in those days where the high castes came out to help and lead the movement of the untouchables for their rights. The satyagraha at Vaikom, mentioned later in this book, provided the acme of this co-operation.

12

S.N.D.P

The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam or S.N.D.P., as it is popularly known, was a society founded in 1903 under the aegis of the Guru for the dissemination of the ideals of Sree Narayana dharma among the masses and for the uplift of the downtrodden caste of Kerala. Anyone from any caste could be a member of the society. Quite naturally the reins of the Society came into the hands of the Ezhavas, who happened to be in an overwhelming majority among its members. The Swami's ideal, which was one of universalism, was not affected by this circumscription of the Society's leadership because everyone of them working under the Guru was heart and soul for the uplift of all depressed castes. They were the more willing group to follow the Guru on the score that the Guru was born in their midst. That was all.

This uniformity of the S.N.D.P's membership facilitated the smooth management of the Society. The Ezhavas were numerically the largest caste, a factor which lent strength to their movement. They had a pivotal position, being at the top of the hierarchy of the untouchables and just below the Nairs. What they achieved inspired all castes below them to emulate their move for betterment, and induced the higher caste to examine and improve the customs and ways of their respective castes. The Ezhava tradition of Vaidyas (physicians) and Sanskrit scholars, landlords, and rich men on top among them equipped them for quick progress up the social ladder. Their leader was a great saint and so the whole movement was imbued with a spiritual aura. Moreover, they had already made some trial movements earlier towards bettering

their position in life, and achieved some success although those attempts involved some sporadic violence. They, therefore, welcomed this opportunity of struggling with greater dignity and aplomb.

The S.N.D.P. now had its vast annual gatherings. They were graced in its earlier days by the presence of the Guru who gave them guidance and determined the tenor of the deliberations. People assembled in hundreds and later in thousands, some special meetings having more than half-a-lakh of people who listened in pin-drop silence to speeches made without the air of loud-speakers. Those meetings would very often be addressed by the higher castes and also by officialdom, including the Dewans of Travancore and Cochin.

The disabilities of the depressed castes dropped one by one like leaves in autumn until at last they could walk among public roads without fear of polluting anyone, use roads around temples, get admitted to schools, colleges and hostels, secure jobs in government service and even have certain percentages of jobs reserved for different groups of castes - and then finally came the entry into temples in 1936. Travancore was the first State in India to grant that privilege to all castes. What a miraculous achievement for the Guru who passed away or attained this samadhi as the saying goes in 1928! To think that all this was gained by the untouchables as a whole within a space of thirty years and without creating any bad blood is indeed wonderful.

The Earliest Secretaries

Each of the governing body members of the Yogam was a great personality. Dr. Palpu was the first Vice-President. His eldest son Natarajan became a disciple of Sree narayana Guru, who carried the spiritual message or the 'Word of the Guru' to all the four corners of the world from Australia to Canada and also established Gurukulas after the pristine institution of the Upanishadic days. Nataraja Guru, who is no more, has left a band of highly intellectual and self-sacrificing disciples to continue his work.

Dr. Palpu sent his second to Japan in the twenties of this century to study the manufacturing of porcelain and the establishment of cottage industries on Japanese models. Palpu himself sponsored many such industries, introduced basic education as far back as 1910, and was responsible for a multitude of social, educational and cultural reforms.

Mahakavi Kumaran Asan who was the secretary gave the S.N.D.P. a strong cultural base for its numerous activities. He rose to be one of the three great modern poets of Kerala and introduced new trends in poetry. His poetic content was a perfect amalgam of Western thought with Upanishadic and Buddhist philosophy as the base. They were all fired by a passion for social reform of the highest order.

Vaikom Satyagraha

T.K.Madhavan who was the organising secretary worked like a Trojan, increasing the membership of the Yogam from 4,000 to 50,000 in 15 months. He organised the whole movement into a well-oiled machine that spurred to action every man, woman and child. In the Vaikom Satyagraha movement which he initiated for achieving the freedom of the roads round the upper-caste temple at Vaikom, he brought Mahatma Gandhi to the South to bless his endeavors and guide the volunteers. Here was someone putting into practice what Mahatmaji had been dreaming all along. The guru, whom Gandhiji met, commanded the greatest respect from him. Always he referred to the Swami as His Holiness Sree Narayana Guru. His influence persuaded the Mahatma to redouble his efforts for Harijan uplift.

The Swami's spirituality was so inspiring and T. K. Madhavan's electrifying enthusiasm so contagious that the broad-minded higher castes responded in a manner that is not easily equalled or surpassed in the history of social reform in India.

During the Vaikom Satyagraha, Madhavan was supported by broad-minded higher caste leaders. The Brahmin Kurur Nilakandhan Namboodiripad, a fearless freedom-fighter and a

social reformer of the front rank worked hand in hand with him. K. P. Keshavan Menon, a Gandhian, and Mannath Padmanabhan were his other close associates and advisors among higher castes who went to jail along with Madhavan for this cause. It is intriguing to note that Mannath Padmanabhan was the founder of the Nair Service Society which was working for the welfare of the Nair community. Here he was offering satyagraha for the rights of communities who were below the Nairs also.

Not satisfied with the struggle and the arrests that followed, Mannath Padmanabhan led a procession, starting from the north consisting of one thousand Savarnas (Higher castes) each, walking a distance of more than one hundred miles to Trivandrum, the capital of the State, and presenting a memorial to the Maharaja on behalf of the entire group of lower castes. M. E. Nader led a similar Jatha of over 1,000 higher castes from the South. The Maharaja was sympathetic, but allowed the question to be decided by the Legislative Assembly. Within a year, roads round the temples were thrown open to all castes. The year was 1925.

C. Kesavan gave the Ezhavas their main baptism in politics, and enjoined its activities with the movement for representative government. This was a new line where the Ezhavas joined hands with the Christians and the Muslims and fought for freedom.

R. Sankar, another stalwart Secretary of the S.N.D.P., concentrated on educational expansion. Within a decade and a half, the Yogam had 13 colleges under it.

13

SAHODARAN AYYAPPAN

Ayyappan, the founder of the Sahodaran Sangham (Association of Brotherhood) mentioned earlier, has carved out an immortal niche for himself in the annals of social movement in Kerala by the revolutionary changes he effected and the sufferings he underwent for the uplift of every man, woman and child, paying special attention to the lowly section of society. The more orthodox among the Ezhavas were averse to granting to cases lower than themselves the rights and privileges which they were gaining one after the other from the higher castes. That was by no means Sree Narayana Guru's idea of reform. It has to be applied in every case consistently.

He was the first Ezhava to become a graduate in Cochin State. All the lower castes were so proud of him that they called him Ayyappan B.A. as if the degree was part of his name. He was honoured like a prince. And people simply hung on his lips. They had great hopes of his becoming a great man. Sure enough, he did become one, but not in the way they wanted him to be.

He wanted all the untouchables to mix together, move forward together, interdine and even intermarry. Once again a leader had arisen who appeared to be far ahead of his times. The people who had rejoiced in having got a treasure, found that they had caught a tartar.

He preached equality among all castes. Preaching was easy. But here he was actually giving shape to Sahodara Sangh (Association of Brothers) and going about practising what he was preaching. That was too much for them to swallow. They opposed him.

Ayyappan suffered all this with endless patience. When, however, they claimed that he was going against his Guru, he went straight to him and sought his advice. Sree Narayana Guru gave him his support in writing :

"Whatever be the religion, language, custom, caste or dress of individuals, since they are all human beings, there can be no objection to their interdining or intermarrying."

This also has become a famous message, one of the universal statements of the Guru.

Such epigrammatic saying contained the principles on which people were to rely in their day-to-day lives. They helped them to appreciate the fundamental philosophy of oneness underlying the entire universe. They knew that such a basis did exist and that was enough for them.

Swami blessed his great disciple Ayyappan with these inspiring words: "You must have the patience of Jesus Christ." This supreme compliment paid by the Swami in the form of advice was richly deserved.

He travelled throughout Kerala preaching the Guru's message like a typhoon, winning all the way. The people of Kerala never returned to their original orthodoxy after that.

After his death more than 10 years ago, his wife Parvathi has been continuing his work by founding an asylum for destitutes on a hillock near Alwaye, known as Sree Narayana Giri.

14

MIRACLES OF THE GURU

Theirs is a glorious ignorance that permits
them to worship what they cannot understand.
- Ananda Coomaraswami

Stories and legends current about the miracles performed by Sree Narayana Guru greatly contributed to the success of his mission among the populace. Several of them were exaggerations and products of superstition, while some others were pure concoctions like the one about his drying up a tank belonging to the higher castes because he was not permitted to bathe in it. These could be dismissed off-hand. Such acts are not in character nor are they in consonance with the magnanimity that a 'Yogin' would possess.

Exaggerations of what the Swami actually did were, by and large, exaggerations of the essence and not of the incidentals of what really happened. Hyperbole is the main stock-in-trade of the common man when he tries to talk about an inexpressible and unexplainable incident.

Nevertheless, the ordinary man's belief is a solid fact even when what he believes is only a delusion. As Shakespeare would have it, "The belief is the thing." It profoundly affects the reactions of the masses. When they consider through those tales that a certain personage is a saint, they are ready to follow. "We don't know, but he knows," is the rustic logic behind it. The absence of any rationale in this belief has no relevance to the result produced in the people, however much we may regret the existence of that type of faith. The multitude would

its age-old customs and rites on the strength of rational arguments of Swami. Their age-old faith could be removed only by their faith in the Guru as a "godman".

Therein lies its value. It is certainly quite true that charlatans depend upon superstitions to gain fame and make money by duping the trusting crowds. On the other hand, it is the great value which men place upon faith that enables the charlatans to succeed. You cannot dupe a person by playing upon his belief unless the belief *per se* has great value to the man concerned.

Having said that, an analytical examination of the so-called miracles is necessary to get the picture of Swami's unparalleled influence on the men's minds in the proper perspective. Two or three out of over a hundred incidents are given here as illustrations.

Parameswaran, the brother of Dr. Palpu, the undisputed social leader of those days and a lieutenant of the Guru, narrated that one day, in 1885, the Swami stated that, "Madan Asan (Swami's father) seems to have passed away." Within a few hours, messengers arrived with the news of his demise.

One cold night at Aruvipuram, Swami and his close disciple Nani Asan were resting in the open by the side of a small fire. Swami was meditating, while Asan curled himself up in a blanket and fell asleep. After some time, the Swami prodded him with a stick and said: "Look." When asan woke up, he saw a tiger and a cub sitting on the other side of the fire calmly watching them. The Swami said: "Don't worry; they won't harm us." Nani Asan at once pulled the blanket over his head, shut his eyes tight and laid down. When he woke up later, the wild animals had disappeared.

Swami's supreme unconcern and intrepidity in the presence of wild animals and their tameness in his presence have been recorded by several of his disciples.

"If you feel no fear or animosity against anyone or anything, you can calm down all animosity to you from any quarter," was the yogic principle he practised with complete success towards all

beings, not excluding human beings either.

Another of Swami's disciples, Guru Prasad Swami, reports as follows:

"Once," said the Swami, "I bathed in a tank which was, I learnt later, meant only for the higher castes. Some people came with raised sticks to beat me up. I asked them calmly: "What has happened?" The sticks were lowered and they allowed me to pass in peace."

This was the incident which turned up in popular belief as an instance where Swami was supposed to have cursed a tank dry.

M. Govindan, a judge, had known a religious person who wore a sanyasi's robes and used to go once every year on a pilgrimage to Kadalkarayandi temple and pray to Subramania, the presiding deity there. He explained to the judge that for some days he happened to be lying as a patient in the Trivandrum General Hospital.

One day a messenger came to the hospital and informed him that his mother was seriously ill. As he was suffering from rheumatism, he was unable to walk. His desire to be at his mother's death bed, was so intense that he decided to go home, crawling. With great difficulty, he crawled up to the gate and there, whom should he see, but Sree Narayana Guru coming that way with three or four disciples! The Guru stopped in front of him, and the patient pleaded with folded hands for succour. After hearing him patiently, Swami asked him to get up. He stood up. Taking a staff from one of the disciples, Swami gave it go him and made him walk. The patient walked home! From that year onwards, he became a pious man, wore a sanyasi's robes and went every year on a pilgrimage to Kadalkarayandi.

Cures of mental afflictions, hysteria, hallucinations, etc. effected by the Guru abound among the miracles attributed to his spiritual powers.

Another set of incidents consisted of cures of gastric ulcer, rheumatism, incurable and unexplainable pains and aches, skin eruptions, etc. which are now known to be caused by mental strain

and stress. The main point to be stressed here is that Swami neve effected any cure whatever for the purpose of public demonstration. He would dismiss all praise, saying, "His faith cured him."

Several persons of those days who were educated in Western modes of thought were very much taken up with the nineteenth century habit of disbelieving faith-cure as nothing but superstition. They, therefore, treated these legends very lightly, even when they did not discard them from their writings altogether. Nevertheless, the tremendous effect those anecdotes had on the minds of the masses has to be reckoned with in any biography of Sree Narayana Guru. Whether one believes in them or not is a different matter altogether.

Moreover, the modern medical concept of psychosomatic diseases and also the cures effected by the magnetic personality of doctors does however, shed a different light altogether on those so-called miracles. Today modern medicine admits the fact that in innumerable cases "The doctor is the treatment". For the masses who did not know all these medical aspects "Swami was the treatment." That was all.

And as has been stated at the beginning of the chapter, this adoration led to their following the reform movements initiated by the Guru with tremendous faith and gusto.

15

SOCIAL REFORMS

The comprehensive scheme ofactivities which the Guru suggested to the down-trodden to take up for their advancement included social reforms also. As far back as 1912, he summed up the various proposals which he had been suggesting at different times in response to the needs of each occasion vide Murkot Kumaran's writings.

Education appropriate to the times was, he said, the *sine qua non* of all progress. Society did have enough promising boys who could grow up as assets to any community. Lack of money was the main obstacle that prevented them from rising to higher levels. Rich men should come forward to help these intelligent, studious, hard-workings lads by granting them scholarships and other monetary aids.

Girls' education should be encouraged, and should never be neglected. Suppressed humanity should be made to stand up on its own legs. The masses should be provided with cottage industries and work-places in the cooperative sector. Instead of continuing as suppliers of raw materials to the affluent countries and purchasing finished products from them at high cost, they should produce manufactured goods in this country itself and thus help the poor. Let the money of the rich be utilised for these purposes also.

Universal education is indispensable. Adult literacy and establishment of libraries in every locality should be encouraged. While waiting for the unlettered to learn to read and write and progress slowly, leaders should provide them with short-cuts to cultural

men should inculcate modern ideas and culture in the illiterate through speeches, songs, dramas and similar means of development of culture.

The S. N. D. P. had started a magazine called *Vivekodayam* which aimed at raising the cultural level of the ordinary man by a process of selective modernisation. Kumaran Asan who edited the journal, was the greatest disciple of the Swami and one of the greatest thinkers and poets of modern Kerala.

Religious practices, social customs and rites often have, the Swami said, symbolic meanings which should not be overlooked. The magazine advocated a modern approach to inter-communal marriages and also in reforming and shortening the duration of various ceremonies as well as in the economising in their cost. The status of marriage rites was raised to that of a sacrament, costly, meaningless customs, etc. were to be abolished.

The orthodox who did not quite appreciate these changes raised the canard that Asan was writing on his own, without Swami's consent or even knowledge. This suspicion was cleared by Swami at one or two public functions when he advocated the need to adopt these reforms by the community.

In those days the marriages of non-Brahmins were, as a rule, merely social functions, the Brahmin marriages along being sacraments with prayers, *mantras*, vows, *poojas* and all the rest of it, taking up three or four day's time.

Swami converted the non-brahmin marriages also into sacramental ceremonies with the performance of *pooja*, the chanting of Vedic verses, the exchange of vows, and with other concomitant observances, all of them hand-picked by the Guru out of the elaborate rituals of the orthodox Hindu marriage system. The Guru, who knew the modern man's mind through and through, limited the duration of the wedding ceremony to half an hour. And for those who were too busy even for that, he prescribed an abridged version that would last only ten minutes.

It is interesting to note that after Swami's close followers among the Ezhavas had adopted this sacramental ceremony and

conducted it in temples, non-Brahmins such as the Nairs, and others commenced transferring their marriage functions to the precincts of temples.

The Ezhavas and some of the higher castes used to conduct a mock-marriage prior to the regular marriage which took place only after a girl came of age. A small ornament called the *Tali* which was the symbol of the marital status was tied round the neck of the child by the person who conducted the ceremony. The real marriage ceremony, however, was performed after the girl had grown up, the bridegroom being someone else altogether. The Guru declared that this *Tali Kettu* (tying of the Tali) function was meaningless and ordered its abolition. In some cases, he sent messages to this effect direct to the parents of the children. In one or two instances, he walked into the midst of the crowd at the eleventh hour of the function and persuaded the father of the girl to stop the ceremony. The fathers agreed. It is noteworthy that in one instance it was the mother of the child who agreed to the stoppage of the function more readily than the father.

Another custom stopped by the Guru was the public feast and function conducted when a girl attained puberty.

These and other similar functions abolished by the Guru saved the families the thousands of rupees which were being lavishly squandered in carrying out social ceremonies that had become redundant in this age. By a sort of osmotic process the Nairs and other castes too stopped observing these functions after the Ezhava community had carried out the reforms at the instance of the Swami.

Space does not permit the narration of all the social changes brought about by the Guru. Among them, however, the amalgamation of small castes deserves special mention.

There were certain castes in Kerala who were numerically so small that those microscopic minorities suffered certain disabilities peculiar to themselves. They were unable to stand up against the atrocities committed on them. As they were scattered in different localities, they found it difficult even to get their children

married to members of their own caste. The Swami made the Ezhavas gather them in their fold and thereby saved them from a social crisis. The year in which he did this was as early as 1906.

It was more or less in this connection that he asked almost in despair: "A casteless society has to be formed. Who will work for it?"

The thought led to the formation of the Sree Narayana Dharma Samaj, consisting of *sanyasis* whom he had enrobed, a Samaj that was drawn from different castes including Brahmins, Nairs, Ezhavas and others.

The institutions at Sivagiri, Alwaye, etc. where caste distinctions had been wiped away from the very beginning are run by this Samaj of sanyasis who were brahmacharis (celibates) with no worldly burdens of wife, children, family, etc. to restrict their service to the weal of mankind. They also run religious institutions, schools, charitable dispensaries, etc. Illuminating the minds of the lowest castes by the philosophy taught by the Swami is also part of their missions.

Prohibitions

As early as 1921 he stated that "Liquor is poison. It should not be produced, sold or consumed," anticipating the promulgation of prohibition by several years.

16

THE LAST DAYS

In February 1928, Sree Narayana Guru fell seriously ill. The news spread immediately throughout Kerala. Although Swami had fallen ill and seriously too, more than once in his life, people somehow had a premonition of tragedy.

The illness started as an aggravation of his old complaint of piles. Later on, however, urinary troubles complicated matters. In spite of the specialist treatment he received, supported by the most tender and expert nursing, Swami got worse and worse. Treatment at Madras, Palghat, Trivandrum, in both allopathic and ayurvedic systems of medicine administered separately and in combination, was of no avail.

At long last, he attained *samadhi* at 3.30 p.m. on the 20th of September, 1928. He was 72 at that time.

Two days prior to that, his pains had abated and he told his disciples and others that he was feeling a great calm. When the end was drawing near the sanyasi's disciples conducted continuous prayers and read out passages from the scriptures. Swami Vidyananda was reading the great religious text, the *Yoga Vasishtam* which deals with the freedom of the *atman*. The reader had reached the portion of *Moksha Prapti* (attainment of eternal bliss) when Swami too attained Moksha (as reported by his disciple Swami Guruprasad who was present on the occasion).

Sanyasis, lay disciples of Swami, leaders of society, along with a huge concourse of people arrived there from far and near, most of them staying on at Sivagiri right up to the consignment of his mortal remains to mother earth in a special sacramental pit pre-

pared for the purpose strictly according to prescribed religious rites.

His disciples could never explain afterwards how thousands of people were accommodated, fed, and attended to by them. Everything went off without a hitch because every one of the congregation cooperated.

The *sanyasis*, *brahmacharis* and along with them hundreds of others fasted and spent the whole night in prayer.

The next day the body was placed on a palanquin decorated with flowers and taken to the bower of the Vanajakshi temple in the evening, accompanied by a huge procession; the entire route resounding to devotional songs and chanting of hymns by the mourners. At five o'clock, the funeral procession wended its way to the spot specially prepared for the *samadhi*.

This consecrated grave was 30 feet square and seven feet deep. In the centre was a pit five feet deep, lined with stones and having a strong foundation.

The Swami's body was lowered in it in a sitting posture and the pit filled with salt, camphor, sandalwood with the head alone remaining exposed. The next day at dawn the head was also similarly covered and then the whole pit closed by a slab. All the while, prayers and chanting of *mantras* continued until finally the performance of funeral rites prescribed for interning the earthly remains of *Advaita sanyasis* were performed. Special prayers continued for 45 days after that ceremony was over.

Sanatana Dharmam, the official journal of the Theosophical Society in Kerala wrote:

"Kerala has been plunged into darkness by the demise of the great Rishi on the 20th of September 1928.

"He has been placed by the people on a pedestal equalling that of Sankara Acharyar and Tunchath Acharyar, two other great sages of Kerala. While Sankara Acharyar was ill-treated by Keralites and Thunchath Acharyar received his due exalted position centuries after his demise, nobody in India in the last few centuries had received the brilliant, long-standing, broad-based, unparalleled

respect from everyone in the land as Sree Narayana Guru did, even while he was alive..."

"For the enlightened of Kerala, he has been a Patanjali in *Yoga*, a Sankara in *Jnana*, a Manu in social law, a Bhuddha in *tyaga*, a Nabi in steadfastness and a Jesus in humility. He has passed on from the realm of humanity to that of the immortals.

"For future generations, he will be one among the *Avatars* (incarnations)."

The Guru won the battle of freedom for the lowest, and became at the same time an honoured and lovable personality for the higher castes also.

17

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE GURU

My way is the way of Sankara Acharya

- Sree Narayana Guru

Romain Rolland, after having read some of the essays by Nataraja Guru, observed:

> "Glasenapp does not say anything regarding the new religious manifestations in South India which are not negligible. Such, for example, is the great Guru Sree Narayana, whose beneficent spiritual activity has been exercising its influence during the past forty years in the State of Travancore on nearly two millions of his followers (he passed away in 1928). His teaching, imbued with the philosophy of Sankara, shows evidence of a striking difference of temperament compared with the mysticism of Bengal of which the effusion of love (*bhakti*) inspired in him a certain mistrust. He was, one might say, a jnanin of action, a grand religious intellectual, who had a keen living sense of the people and of social necessities. He has contributed greatly to the elevation of the oppressed classes in South India, and his work has been associated at certain times with that of Gandhi (cf. the articles of his disciple, P. Natarajan, in the "Sufi Quartely" Geneva, December 1928 and in the following months)"
>
> - *Vide The Life of Sree Ramakrishna* by Romain Rolland.

That succinct description is the best sketch of the Guru to come from the West.

Erudite scholars who had reflected on the philosophy of the Swami have stated that he has, like Sankara Acharya, given us a careful re-expression of Vedic thoughts, with special reference to the sayings in the *Gita*. And scholars of the *Gita* explain that while the *Upanishads* stress the path of *Jnana* (union with God through knowledge) almost exclusively, the *Gita* lays emphasis on all the three paths -i.e. union through action (*karma yoga*), union through devotion (*bhakti yoga*) and union through knowledge (*jnana yoga*).

The originality of the Gita lies in making these three paths blend into one.

Sankara expounds in depth the message of the Gita and other Vedic works and establishes that *Advaita* (non-dualism) is the acme of Vedic philosophy.

Sree Narayana Guru repeats this assertion and in the very process of that repetition extends it and almost recreates it. For that matter, this technique of creative repetition has been the chief characteristic of Hinduism from the Vedas down to the present day.

The Vedas themselves appear to have been early prayers elevated to a higher spiritual level. The thinkers of the *Upanishads* were no doubt revolutionaries straining at the leash of sacrificial religion of the Vedas, in order to progress towards a universal mystical religion. Nevertheless, they utilised all that was useful in the Vedic hymns even while they engaged in the fundamental revision of earlier concepts.

The *Gita* expanded, consolidated and synthesised the *Upanishadic* philosophy.

Sree Narayana Guru laid emphasis on the teachings of the *Gita* especially where Yoga is conceived as a remarkable synthesis or integration within oneself, integration with society and integration with the supreme spirit.

The Guru was not a ritualist. Nor was he a Vedantist who believed that one should desist from all activity if one wished to attain *moksha*.

He did not stay in the woods, retiring from the world, spending his time in just contemplating on the Brahman. Once he had experienced the non-duality of the divine being he started working among the people. His renunciation did not consist in the giving up of all work but the renunciation of the fruits of work. He lived according to the message of the *Gita* which commands us to live in God, but to work in the world to serve His purpose. He led a holy life. He took refuge in the Spirit. He saw everything and every being in the universe as aspects of One Reality.

The Guru shows us the Vedantic way of understanding. His great philosophical poem *Atmopadesa Sataka* repeatedly tells us that mere knowledge is not enough. Look within -go and find - search -try and experience -see how it works - think -practise what you are told. These repeated exhortations of his are intended to make one realises again and again that the comprehender of Vedanta does not mean a man who grasps the verbal meaning of the lines, but one who has verified the truths in his own person.

As the mystics would have it a person has to become what he knows.

Sree Narayana Guru's religion is a way of confronting life in all its aspects. All mankind has to be responsive to true spiritual realisation by living in amity, goody fellowship, and love, free from all antagonism of race, nationality, creed or caste. This has to be done in the name of the one supreme being who is *Santam* (calm, tranquil), *Sivam* (auspicious), *Advaitam* (one). That is the understanding which produces the same result as in the case of an excited visionary who realises cosmic truths. The two processes are one. Practise it and you will actually experience, even when you cannot understand it through reasoning, how spirituality penetrates all activity.

The greatest emphasis is therefore laid by the Guru on the formula that there are both a theory and a corresponding way of life that cannot be divided. The Guru expounds this philosophy in terms of one tradition and then in terms of another, repeating at every opportunity: verify it in yourself, verify it.

18

HIS WRITINGS

The written works of the Guru have to be studied carefully for understanding his philosophy which formed the foundation of all his activities and his messages throughout his life. As has been explained in the earlier chapter, that philosophy was *Advaita*. As one of the greatest sages of India, he presented the pristine philosophy of India for practical application in modern life as a remedy for the many ills that modern man is heir to. The social reforms, the modification of rites and ceremonies, the advocacy of equality between man and man, the encouragement of the spead of education, the exhortation to all mankind to lead a clean life in every respect, especially in the struggle for a rise in economic status - all these have a deep spiritual basis because he was an *Advaitin*.

The life of Sree Narayana Guru falls broadly into three stages. We see him as a devotee, living as he did "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife", in "the cool sequestered vale of life", 'in forests, on the hills, on the banks of rivers as a searcher for the truth that he needs must see". Then he becomes a full-fledged *tapaswin* who attains the ultimate stage of a *yogin*, when he comes out into the world to fulfil the message of the *Gita* and becomes as Romain Rolland puts it, "a *jnanin* in action, a grand religious intellectual, who had a keen sense of the people and of their social needs".

His works both in poetry and in prose reflect these three stages. In the first stage, the poems are mainly hymns of *bhakti*. They are sweetly musical. In those poems Swami is adoring the Ishta Devata (one's favourite form of the ONE) to obtain strength

of mind and steadfastness to console the desolate spirit. He prays in turn to Vasudeva, Siva, Subramanya, Ganesa and Kali.

In the second stage of the poems, we see the inner light getting brighter and brighter. Spiritual experiences of a disturbing a nature in the beginning gradually dissolve into a great calm which is just short - if at all it is so - of sublime bliss. Ten Verses in Realisation (*Anubhooti Dasakam*), Light of Non-dualsim (*Advaita Deepika*), Song of Self-Realisation (*Swanubhava Giti*) and such other works reflect this stage. The very names are self-explanatory.

The song of Serpent Power (*Kundalini Pattu*) is a poem explaining, as far as words can do so, the mystic experience of one's identity with the Absolute, detailing the six steps of the *Yoga Sadhana* of Patanjali. The serpent is the symbol of soul-force (*atmeeya sakti*) and the six steps are esoteric stages in the upward journey towards Divine Bliss. It is one of the most inspiring poems in *bhakti* literature, and clearly indicates that they are expressions of real experience. The words therein are not only mystic, but expressed in an elusive and ineffable style.

Explanation of these poems can never be undertaken in a book of this type and size. One can only point out their riches and persuade the reader to go to the works themselves.

The cream of his works is experienced where he talks in pure pictorial and symbolic terms of what he saw, felt and experienced as a seer. He is musing to himself, muttering almost inaudibly, recollecting his experiences - mystical and mysterious. The words are puzzling because our normal worldly connotations are not sufficient to understand them. Nor does our modern education provide us with the ideological background for the purpose.

It sounds to the worldly-wise man something like the exposition of calculus to one who is innocent of any knowledge of mathematics.

They have a distressing brevity, presenting as they do, the distilled essence of the *Upanishadic* philosophy with startling suggestions and novel interpretations. Intricate problems and

mysteries are tackled by the Guru with great felicity. But he leaves the way in which he worked it all out to be explained by a competent inerpreter; an interpreter who has to be thoroughly familiar with the abstruse vocabulary of Vedanta which the Guru uses with perfect ease. Excellent in dignified statement and depth of thought as they are we are struck by his use of small, ordinary, old Malayalam words which have been lost in the market-place of daily usage. And yet, once the meaning is explained, the layman gratefully appreciates that those words are just apt for the occasion. sometimes the Guru makes the context impregnate an old word with a depth of meaning that surely did not exist in its original connotation! And when we have at last arrived at that verbal explanation, we are still dazed because Vedanta has to be lived and is not to be learnt by rote.

The Garland of Darsana *(Darsana Mala)*, Self-Knowledge: Hundred Verses *(Atmopadesa Satakam)* and Prayer to God: Ten Verse *(Daiva Dasakam)* are the most authoritative of his philosophical writings. The poem *Self-Knowledge* could be styled the *Gita* for the modern man and the future generations.

"Those whom we know as 'he' and 'they' are all, in the ultimate analysis, One, the same atman in so many forms. Our actions for our own good should aim at once at the good of others too."

The *Prayer of God* in ten verses is pure, simple, musical verse. It plunges in one verse into the depths of the *Upanishadic* techniques of explaining the unexplainable by defining it as: "Not this, not this" and in the very next verse expresses as our gratitude to God for giving us our daily bread, erasing in one stroke all distinction between the spirit and the body.

Here he is translating *Advaita* into an idiom that even children can grasp, fully and well:

"Thou art-
Creation and
The numberless creatures.
Thou art, O! God!

The means of creation too.
Thou art
Truth, wisdom, and bliss.
Thou art also
Past, present and future
All rolled into one-
In a word
Nothing exists
Other than thee."

Self-Knowledge in One Hundred Verses gives a fine version of the *Upanishadic* philosophy carefully collating differences of views, omitting those portions that run into other standpoints, only to demolish them by arguments. All such aspects characteristic of the Upanishads have lost their relevance today. The Swami quietly waves them aside and gives us a taste of his mystic experiences also which make *Advaita* philosophy come to life before the reader's eyes. An attempt at summarising the book would be an unpardonable impertinence.

I have attempted in these pages to reflect the glory of the life of Sree Narayana Guru, much as a dew-drop makes itself bold to reflect the majesty of the heavens above. As the dew-drop cannot help doing it, no apology is necessary nor tendered.

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